What is the role for forest certification in improving relationships between logging companies and communities? Lessons from FSC in Cameroon

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SUMMARY

Responding to pressure from international markets, environmental NGOs and donors, several logging companies in the Congo Basin have opted for voluntary certification schemes, such as the one proposed by the Forest Stewardship Council (FSC). The FSC scheme promotes forest management that is environmentally appropriate, economically viable and socially beneficial. The latter component, which is the focus of this paper, aims at the optimal integration of the local population in the forest management. We assess local organizations active around six FSC certified concessions in Cameroon and evaluate their legitimacy and effectiveness in building and maintaining a positive relationship between communities and logging companies. Results show that FSC certification plays a key role in the emergence of multi-stakeholder platforms that function as mechanisms of improved 'social exchange'. To some extent, such exchanges also contribute to less conflicting relations between logging companies and local communities, as well as reinforcing the social requirements of the forest law. Some shortcomings, however, remain, and we suggest logging companies should consider improving the balance of power between themselves and the communities, notably by reviewing the current top-down approach in establishing and managing discussion platforms.

Keywords: FSC, forest certification, effectiveness, multi-stakeholder platform, Cameroon, law enforcement

Quel rôle pour la certification forestière dans l'amélioration des relations entre les populations locales et les compagnies forestières? Leçons de l'expérience du FSC au Cameroun

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Sous la pression des marchés internationaux, des ONG environnementales et des bailleurs, plusieurs compagnies forestières du bassin du Congo ont opté pour des systèmes de certification volontaire telle que le Forest Stewardship Council (FSC). Le FSC encourage une gestion forestière respectueuse de l'environnement, économiquement viable et socialement bénéfique. La dernière composante qui est l'objet de cet article vise à intégrer les populations locales dans la gestion forestière. Nous examinons les plateformes de concertation actives autour de six concessions forestières certifiées au Cameroun et évaluons leur effectivité ainsi que leur légitimité à établir et maintenir des relations positives entre les compagnies forestières et les populations. Les résultats montrent que la certification FSC est déterminante dans l'émergence des plateformes qui sont des mécanismes de collaboration. Dans une certaine mesure, cette collaboration contribue également à diminuer les tensions entre les compagnies forestières et les populations locales et rendre effectif la réglementation forestière.

¿Cual es el papel de la certificación forestal en la mejora de las relaciones entre las empresas madereras y las comunidades? Lecciones del FSC en el Camerún

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En respuesta a la presión de los mercados internacionales, las ONG ambientales y los donantes, varias empresas madereras de la Cuenca del Congo han optado por participar en sistemas de certificación voluntarios, como el ofrecido por el Forest Stewardship Council (FSC). El sistema del FSC promueve una gestión forestal apropiada para el medio ambiente, económicamente viable y socialmente beneficiosa. Este último componente, que constituye el foco de este estudio, tiene como objetivo la integración óptima de la población local en la gestión forestal. Para ello, evaluamos las organizaciones locales activas en torno a seis concesiones certificadas por el FSC en Camerún y analizamos su legitimidad y efectividad en la construcción y el mantenimiento de una relación positiva entre las comunidades y las empresas madereras. Los resultados muestran que la certificación FSC juega un papel clave en la aparición de plataformas de partes interesadas múltiples, que funcionan como mecanismos de "intercambio social" mejorado. Hasta cierto punto, estos intercambios contribuyen también a la reducción de conflictos en las relaciones entre las empresas madereras y las comunidades locales, así como a reforzar los requisitos sociales de la legislación forestal. Siguen presentes, sin embargo, algunas deficiencias, por lo que sugerimos que las empresas madereras deberían considerar el mejorar el equilibrio de poder entre ellas y las comunidades, en particular mediante la revisión del enfoque actual de tipo arriba-abajo para el establecimiento y la gestión de foros de discusión.

INTRODUCTION

Forest management certification has been promoted in the last couple of decades as one of the most innovative approaches to improving forest management and curbing forest degradation in tropical countries (Cashore *et al*. 2004, Bernstein and Cashore 2007, Agrawal *et al*. 2008). Among the different certification initiatives to date, the Forest Stewardship Council (FSC) seems to have won what Smouts (2001) and Humphreys (2006) describe as the "war of certificates", to emerge as a leader in sustainable forest management in tropical countries. FSC certification is a third-party certification system aiming at promoting environmentally appropriate, economically viable and socially beneficial forestry operations through a standard set of principles, criteria and indicators (Marx and Cuypers 2010, Teitelbaum and Wyatt 2013). In theory, certification has the potential to address social and environmental concerns of forest operations and is currently the principal means used by consumers to verify that forest products have been harvested in sustainable manner (Cashore *et al*. 2005, Cubbage *et al*. 2010). In practice, however, evidence of a strong positive relation between the presence of FSC certification and an overall improvement of management practices remains scant (Blackman and Rivera 2011, Cerutti *et al*. 2011). In particular, the social benefits of certification, such as social awareness and participation in decision-making, in communities living in and around logging concessions in tropical developing countries, remains largely understudied (Dare *et al.* 2011, Cubbage *et al.* 2010, Keskitalo *et al.* 2009).

This paper seeks to foster knowledge about the impacts of FSC forest certification in the Congo Basin by assessing the level of implementation of some social criteria included into both the current legal framework and the FSC standard as applied in Cameroon. In particular, the paper focuses on the effectiveness and legitimacy of multi-stakeholder dialogue platforms established around FSC certified concessions and their impact on the relationship between communities and logging companies. According to the national standard of FSC for Cameroon platforms refer to a "framework of multi-stakeholder consultation on conflict related to the management of the forest management unit" (FSC 2012:20). It means local organizations that function as mechanisms of improved 'social exchange'. Legitimacy refers here to "the fairness of the information-gathering process; for a process to be legitimate, it needs to consider appropriate values, interests, concerns, and specific circumstances from the perspective of different users" (Mollinga 2010:3). Effectiveness is intended as the ability of platforms to influence the actions of logging companies in order to avoid potential conflicts with local populations (Auld *et al.* 2008). The paper argues that FSC forest certification plays a key role in the emergence of multi-stakeholder platforms as fundamental mechanism of exchange between local communities and logging companies. It also helps reinforcing the social requirements of the forest law, which are largely unenforced (Vandenhaute and Doucet 2006). However, the effectiveness of these institutions in conflict resolution remains limited and also face problems of social legitimacy.

The case of Cameroon is relevant because the country has the more mature legal framework in the region, which has been used as a blueprint for other countries. It also has the largest number of approved management plans and concessions started to be FSC-certified at the end of 2005, thus providing a longer implementation period when compared to other countries in the region, such as Gabon and Republic of Congo. Also, although Cameroon has the smallest area of certified forests (938,424 ha, against 1,873,505 ha for Gabon and 1,319,300 ha for Congo), it has five certified companies, i.e. the largest number of companies involved in FSC certification as compared to three and one in Gabon and Republic of Congo respectively. Thus, the Cameroonian context presents good experiences of the implementation of forest certification from which lessons can be drawn.

The paper is organised as follows. The next section describes the methodology used for the selection of study sites and data collection. The following section will present the results, with a description of multi-stakeholder platform, the contribution of logging companies to local development and the constraints of platforms in terms of functioning and conflicts management. A discussion of the role of FSC in improving relationship between logging companies and communities will follow, with considerations on its impact on living conditions and the effectiveness of multi-stakeholder platforms. The last section presents few concluding remarks.

METHODS AND SELECTION OF STUDY SITES

The survey was carried out in six forest management units in Cameroon belonging to three logging companies (Table 1).

Six villages per company were selected for the survey. After development and testing in three villages in one of the selected management units surveys were completed in eighteen villages. Villages were selected with the help of logging companies where forestry operations were 1) on-going, 2) planned for the coming year, and 3) recently (1 or 2 years) completed. This was to assess the level of social benefits and their perceived effectiveness in various stages of logging, as there might be differences in the perception of effectiveness around the same FSC-certified logging concessions in different stages of logging. In other words, while social benefits do indeed reach on average the entire neighbouring population during the harvesting rotation, the proximity to, or the distance from, a logging area might influence the perception of their importance. Also, the distance between a given village and the actual zones of exploitation might influence the intensity and the nature of the conflicts between local communities and logging companies.

TABLE 1 *Study sites*

Enterprises	Size (ha)	Major markets served
Company 1	97 043	Europe
Company 2	125 490	Europe
Company 3	176 071	Europe

The representativeness of each village in multi-stakeholder dialogue platforms was also taken into account. This criterion was used to analyse the representativeness of platforms as well as the accountability of representatives towards the population. The representativeness of platforms was established through the analysis of 1) their implementation and the selection of representatives, 2) their inclusiveness especially the participation of women and indigenous people in the decision making process 3) and the frequency of meetings between representatives and the villagers.

The last criterion considered relates to the ethnic structuring of the local consultative platforms and concerns the sociological diversity of the study area. The question of the participation of rural people in forest management is addressed according to the groups considered.

Interviews were conducted with each logging company to introduce the study topic and request availability to participate. At the documentary level public documents in particular management plans, socio-economic studies, certification reports as well as the social procedures and relevant written policies were reviewed in order to identify the actions undertaken by forest managers on social issues. Social actions are understood as those carried out by logging companies in compliance with FSC standards to improve the economic well-being of the local population while also protecting the conservation of social values, as well as securing the recognition of the land rights and customary uses of the local population, particularly those of indigenous peoples. The review focused on 1) the strategies adopted by logging companies to regulate and improve relationship with local communities, 2) the benefit-sharing mechanisms adopted by logging companies and 3) mechanisms in place that affect customary rights to forest resources.

In rural areas, 87 semi-structured interviews were conducted among different categories of stakeholders: representatives of logging companies, local and international NGOs, forestry administration, councils and village authorities. In addition, focus group discussions were organized with local communities in 18 villages around forest concessions that is 272 people, of which 68 percent were men and 32 percent women. In all focus groups discussions, all extended families or lineages were represented. Separate discussions were held with indigenous peoples where socio-cultural environment did not favour their effective representation.

RESULTS

Typology of multi-stakeholders platforms

Even though some forms of multi-stakeholders platforms are mandated by the legal framework, we found that implementation was very weak before the advent of FSC certification. Indeed, all FSC audit reports required the setting up and the effective functioning of platforms as preconditions to the delivery of the FSC certificates. Following the above requirements, platforms were established the year preceding the certification and actions were undertaken for improving their functioning. The FSC standard does not provide a specific model of platform in order to help forest managers to comply with its requirements. Each logging company is left free to determine the type of platform to be implemented depending on the legal requirements and its own strategy (Table 2).

The 'legal option' for platforms was developed in 1999 through the concept of 'Forest management committee' (FMC) for enhancing the participation of the local communities in forest management. According to the regulation, FMCs as local institutions should play a key role in the protection of use rights and act as consultation and negotiation bodies with respect to forestry administration, logging companies and NGOs. Hence, in accordance with regulation, there exists in theory one FMC per village. However, due to numerous villages surrounding forest concessions, often very close to each others, logging companies have often opted to group several villages on the basis on their distances, ethnics groups and the relationship between the villages. The mission of a multi-stakeholder platform is to be a permanent interface between communities and companies, collect complaints and arbitrate conflicts, identify and manage development projects. In this regard, FMCs must be well informed of the activities carried out by the forestry administration and logging companies concerning the management of the forest concession. Administrative authorities and local staff of ministry of forest and

TABLE 2 *Organization of multi-stakeholder dialogue platforms*

Characteristics	Company 1	Company 2	Company 3
Type of platform	Ad hoc platform	FMC	FMC
Mandate	3 years	3 years	3 years
Territorial jurisdiction	9 to 27 villages	3 to 12 villages	14 villages
Accountability procedure	Public meetings Consultation Information on activities carried out	Public meetings Consultation Information and sensitization	Public meetings Consultation Information and sensitization
Nomination method	Election Co-optation Consensus	Election Co-optation Auto-designation	Election Co-optation Consensus

wildlife are in charge of implementing and accompanying the FMCs.

Conversely, the 'company' option is a form of ad hoc platform that was initiated and supported by one company in 2004. The company opted for such platform because of the absence of local FMCs and other local institutions able to be a bridge among the main stakeholders, as well as because of the main role that must have been played by state officials for the FMCs' implementation, which might reportedly have contributed to slow down the process. The platform's mandate is to bring major stakeholders around the table.

In the 'legal' option the structure of the platform is as follow: chief of village, local and external elite, indigenous people, youth, women, farmer's representatives. For the 'company' option the composition is 1 'manager' each 2/3 villages, 'associate members' – company and council, 'observers' – local admin, chiefs, NGOs. Members of platforms are appointed in both options after a process of consultation and information of local communities about the role and importance of such institutions.

The first stage of the process of appointment is at the village level. At this level, 45 percent of members of surveyed platforms are elected by community members while 31 percent were appointed after a consensus about the person who should represent the village and 17 percent nominated by chiefs of villages. In some cases, (7 percent out of the total) people were self-appointed. The nomination method that was mainly used by chiefs of village both in legal and industrial option remains limited. The choice of representatives is sometimes deeply driven by family relationships so that a filiation with the chief of village and elders of community increases the chance to become member of the platform. That was the case of three platforms out of ten where this relationship existed.

The second stage of the process is the election of managing committee by village representatives. The relevant criteria to become a member of managing committee are honesty, dynamism, availability and competence, as measured by the communities. Competence is the most important criterion and means candidates at the election must be able to write and read in order to better protect the interests of local population. In this regard retired civil servants are preferred compared to other farmers and indigenous people due to their past experience as state officials compared to a general lack of such capacities within local communities. While there are no indigenous people in the forest management units belonging to Companies 1 and 2, 24 percent of members of investigated platforms were indigenous people in Company 3. However, their participation in the decision-making process remains limited because of illiteracy and cultural norms which tend to marginalise them.

The representativeness of some multi-stakeholder dialogue platforms is weak as logging companies mainly prefer skilled candidates although some of them lack social legitimacy. In the surveyed platforms, 18 percent of presidents have a university level, 37 percent were in secondary school while 27 percent have a primary level and 18 percent have no schooling. Forty-six percent of these representatives

were selected because they were skilled and legitimate, while 36 percent were skilled and non-legitimate and 18 percent unskilled and non-legitimate. The selection of the skilled candidates, particularly external elite, had sometimes negative consequences on the functioning of platforms. According to officials of Company 3, during the first stage of implementation about 80 percent of presidents of FMCs were external elites that used the association for political purposes, particularly during council's elections resulting in a breakdown in collaboration with the council. In this case, external elites were banned from the composition of the platforms.

The development of multi-stakeholder platforms highlighted the role of FSC certification in enforcing forest regulations in Cameroon. Surveillance audits forced logging companies to set up such organizations and thus meet the legal requirements. As a result, consultation with communities improved as well as the participation of the stakeholders in the appointment process. However, the participation of vulnerable people to the decision-making remains weak due to the lack of capacity and the preference given to skilled members.

Contribution of logging companies to socio-economic well-being

The FSC certification significantly influenced the effective contribution of logging companies to socio-economic well-being and improved relationship between companies and local communities in Companies 1 and 3. The role of platforms in this process was to collect relevant projects proposal throughout the villages before their submission to logging companies. Also, these institutions are in charge of the monitoring of selected projects and acceptance of activities carried out. FSC audits encouraged logging companies to support social projects and provide evidence of social projects carried out in accordance with terms and conditions of management plan. In addition, the motivation of logging companies is to avoid conflicts likely to compromise their FSC certification. Social projects were mainly related to infrastructure and income-generating activities (Figure 1).

Income-generating activities refer to the support given to local population in the process of acquisition and development of community forests. In addition, community farms and cattle breeding are promoted within communities. Infrastructures include road maintenance, construction and renovation of schools, health centres, cultural centres and water supply. In the sector of education, donations of teaching material were listed while community halls were identified in the sector of culture. According to 60 percent of officials of ad hoc platforms (Company 1), social projects are initiated by villages, while 40 percent attribute projects' starting to platforms. Company 2 have a preference for the top-down approach as 40 percent of respondents attribute project proposals to the population, against 60 percent by the company. As regards Company 3, project proposals formulated by the population are equivalent to those initiated by FMC, which is 40 percent for each group, and the remaining 20 percent

FIGURE 1 *Typology of social projects carried out by logging companies*
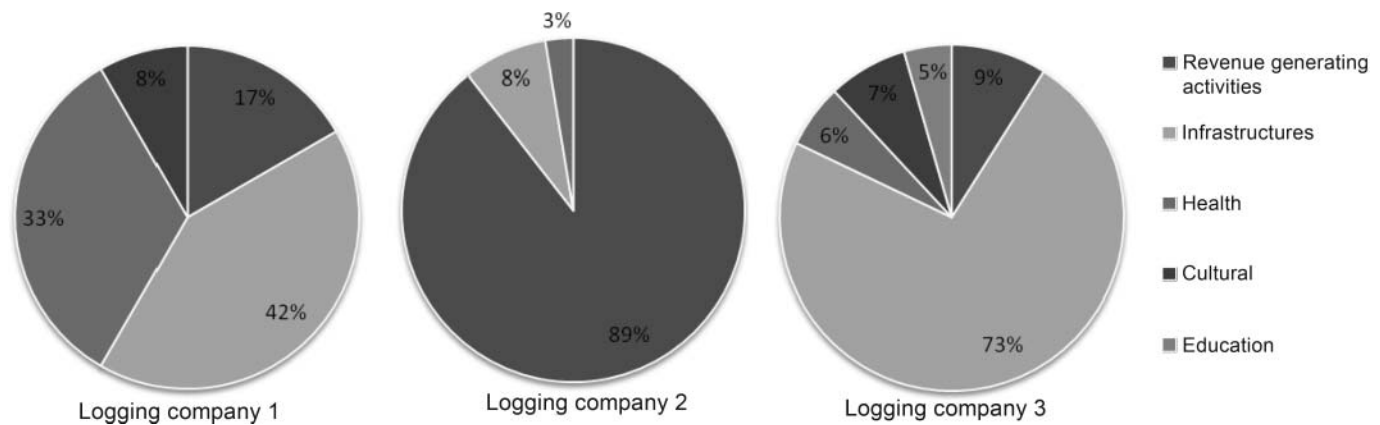
initiated by the forest operator. For each company, the participation of the population in the selection of social projects is reducible to the consultation with the chief of the village, chief of lineage and community leaders.

Project proposals are primarily approved by logging companies except in Company 3 where there is a validation committee including state officials, council and company officials, NGOs and representatives of FMCs and indigenous people. Approved projects are funded through a dedicated budget (Company 2) or a local development fund. The funding mechanism of Company 1 was to aside US$ 2 per cubic meter of annual harvested wood. This funding strategy was applied only to one concession which covers 25 villages. The platform of the second concession has a different system of financing. The association, which covers 9 villages, receives a lump sum of US$ 10 000 per annum. Sixty per cent is dedicated to the development of social infrastructures such as hospitals and wells in the villages where forestry operations are going on, while 40 percent is reserved for the council in order to carry out social projects in villages where the forestry operations are planned for the coming years. The strategy of Company 3 is based on council approach seeing that the boundaries of its concessions overlap in two councils and also because the projects submitted by FMCs have to meet the requirements of the local development plan of the council. Thus, there is a partnership agreement between the council and the company setting the typology of social projects. The local development fund has a budget of US$ 10 000 per year for each council. In all the cases the money is managed by the logging company reportedly because of the failure of the policy of handing large sums to local communities and the lack of control over the activities of the local authorities.

According to local NGOs working on concessions of Companies 1 and 2, projects do not always relate to the improvement of the well-being of the local population. Company 1 invested huge sums (US$ 12 000) for the construction of a number of community halls which are not considered to be useful by the local NGOs. Conversely, micro-projects backed by Company 2 have been challenged by the population that have considered them to be unsuitable for their needs.

Projects initiated by Company 3 are more acceptable in view of the proximity of its social team with the population and its neutral position in the initiation of projects. In both cases, companies usually prefer projects that help to give visibility to their social agenda, although they are not always considered useful to the population.

As a positive result of forest certification, the contribution of logging companies to the long-term well-being of local population has been improved in terms of new benefit-sharing mechanisms, building infrastructures and supporting income-generating activities either at the village or the council levels. Conversely, the top-down approach which results in the implementation of projects that do not match the needs of communities is the main weakness of the system.

The designing process and effectiveness of multi-stakeholder platforms

The establishment of a multi-stakeholder dialogue platform is usually an initiative of the forest manager. According to 83 percent of people interviewed platforms have been established by logging companies while 17 percent attribute this initiative to the forestry administration or to a local NGO. For example, in the case of Company 3, the active participation of the company in the establishment of FMCs led to the latter being considered by forestry administration and local population as associations belonging to the company, which should therefore ensure their functioning and monitoring. Interviews conducted with local NGOs and representatives of all logging companies indicate that forest operators determine the type of platform and mobilize financial and logistical resources needed for their establishment and functioning. In Companies 1 and 3, local NGOs support the creation and structuring of community associations as well as the representatives' designation phase while administrative authorities validate results and installation of members of management committees. In the case of Company 2, the process of creation and installation of FMCs was jointly implemented by logging company and state officials.

Multi-stakeholder dialogue platforms do not have financial autonomy and financial partners other than logging

companies. Their existence depends on grants and logistical means provided by the forest managers, limiting their autonomy in terms of decision-making or initiative at the local level. All companies opted for platforms that can serve as an interface with the local population. Each company sets the conditions for funding and the amounts allowed for the platforms in the form of direct allocation. The contribution of Company 1 to the functioning of each ad hoc platform is about US\$ 3 200 per year, while dedicated budget of US\$ 400 and US\$ 640 are allocated respectively by Companies 2 and 3 in order to cover the running cost of each FMC per annum. In addition of money provided by Company 2, local councils were supposed to support the FMCs through the 10 percent of annual forest fees dedicated to local communities. Annual forest fees are a tax enacted by forest regulations that must be redistributed to villages and councils surrounding the forest concessions. In practice, only funds coming from the logging company were paid to the FMCs.

Finally, the effectiveness of multi-stakeholder platforms relies on external actors such as logging companies and NGOs who support the different stages of implementation. Forestry administration and local councils remain doubtful to provide financial support in order to strengthen these organizations.

Effectiveness of platforms in managing conflicts

Two major reasons were reported to cause conflicts. First, boundaries between logging concessions and customary areas, which are common to all the concessions and concern primarily the overlap of logging titles as well as the delimitation of production forests and agro-forestry areas. Results show that the design of harvesting areas by the forestry administration in 1990s is the cause of these conflicts. According to the local population, the classification process was not participatory inasmuch as they were not initially consulted. This exclusion resulted in the 'imposed' delimitation of the agro-forestry zone and overlapping of concessions and community forests. Second, damages caused to cultural relevant places such as ancient villages and sacred sites within the concessions and to cropping sites outside the concessions. The following table gives an overview of conflicts for each company (Table 3).

Reported solutions to address conflicts are common to all the companies. The first approach is the payment of financial compensation to communities. This approach is mainly used in case of degradation of cropping sites due to forestry operations while cultural relevant places are identified and protected in order to maintain their integrity. Conflicts regarding the overlapping of logging titles are resolved at the local level through conflicts resolutions agreements between logging companies and communities stating the renunciation of the latter to the disputed area. As part of their commitments logging companies provide operating equipment aiming at supporting the development of community forests and financial compensation. The funds provided by the company have given rise to conflicts within the communities on several occasions. This is due to the local management of the money and to suspected misappropriation by those members of the community charged to oversee and manage the money. When conflicts of boundaries with community forests have arisen, logging companies referred to the forestry administration for the modification of such boundaries. In all cases considered in this paper, the surfaces of community forests decreased as a result of such modifications.

Interviews show that multi-stakeholder platforms are not actively involved in conflict resolution. The local population prefers to send their complaints directly to logging companies because platforms depend on the latter for technical and financial support and there is a reportedly constant suspicion by community members of collusion between logging companies and platforms' representatives. Following a similar logic, logging companies give preference to direct negotiations with villagers to resolve crises, but this approach contributes to discredit the multi-stakeholder dialogue platforms. Logging companies also hire external mediators, particularly local or national NGOs to provide help in conflict resolution. These two approaches are systematically used to resolve conflicts concerning boundaries between FMUs and community forests (case of Companies 1 and 3) and those that can result in confrontation, such as the refusal by the company to allow for the construction of a main road across the concession, in accordance with its management plan, while this road represents an economic opportunity for the people considering the degree of isolation of the area (case of Company 2).

TABLE 3 *Conflicts between logging companies and the population*

Logging companies	Source of conflict	Type of conflicts	Resolution strategy
Company 1	Imperfections in forest zoning Presence of farms in the FMUs	Overlap between FMUs and community forests Presence of farms in the FMU Delimitation of agro-forestry zone	Financial compensation
Company 2	Imperfections in forest zoning	Opening-up of villages situated in the FMU Degradation of cultural sites	Review of FMU borders
Company 3	Imperfections in forest zoning	Overlap between FMUs and community forests Overexploitation of main species	Financial compensation Community forest support project

In two documented cases, the local population solicited the arbitration of public authorities.

FSC-certified companies and the local population prefer mediation as an approach to conflict resolution. This leads to consideration of social aspects by logging companies through (1) the recruitment of a sociologist in the management unit, albeit most often with limited financial and logistical resources (e.g. Company 2), and (2) the establishment of a social team with logistical means and annual dedicated budget (Companies 1 and 3).

The imperfect delimitation of the permanent forest estate seems the most likely cause of conflicts. Several conflicts resolutions strategies are implemented in order to meet FSC requirement but also for building trust among stakeholders. Accordingly face to face negotiations and permanent contacts with communities are the key elements of the resolution strategies although they sometimes contribute to weaken platforms.

DISCUSSION

Results show that in Cameroon, the implementation of the social requirements of forest certification, as compared to those mandated by the legal framework, contributed to improving the relationships between certified concessions and local communities, notably through the promotion of more effective multi-stakeholder platforms and benefit sharing schemes. Both ideas, the platforms and the schemes, were introduced in Cameroon by the 1994 forest law as tools for enhancing social and economic development in local communities. But in a context of weak implementation, enforcement and control by the forest administration, those tools have had very limited positive impacts in terms of improving livelihoods and participation of local communities, especially indigenous people, in the forest management.

As a result of forest certification, however, improved consultation of local communities has been integrated in the management practices of logging companies as well as effective conflicts resolution mechanisms. The latter is an innovation in the forestry sector inasmuch as logging companies no longer have recourse to repression and that the population has abandoned the logic of confrontation. Building trust is then based on strong interpersonal relationships between communities and logging companies as stated by Tulaeva (2013).

In addition FSC requirements forced logging companies to play an active role in the functioning of multi-stakeholder platforms. For instance the analysis of summary public reports revealed corrective action requests were imposed to surveyed companies before the initial certification and during surveillance audits concerning this issue. Our results corroborate findings on the impacts of forest certification in other regions of the world. In Russia, Keskitalo *et al.* (2009) found that consultation between local communities and logging companies is closely related to the adoption of FSC, while Cubbage *et al.* (2010) found that consultation with communities increased in Chile and Argentina due to forest certification.

The adoption of forest certification has also improved multi-stakeholder management by promoting the participation of public officials, private companies, civil society and the local population in the composition of dialogue platforms. However, such finding must be somehow balanced by the fact that, although surveyed platforms did include a variety of stakeholders, power and influence within the platforms have still a long way to go to be equally distributed. Significant power gaps exist between stakeholders depending on access to information, financial resources or political experience (Hemmati *et al*. 2002). Also, the bargaining power of groups such as logging companies, NGOs and elites is much stronger than that of local communities, while marginalized groups such as indigenous people and women have almost no voice in decision-making.

The results illustrate some limitations of the top-down approach in the forestry sector in Cameroon. This approach is primarily driven by external actors and has been shown to be ineffective in community forestry and conservation projects (Nguinguiri 1999, Oyono 2004a, Oyono and Efoua 2006, Poissonnet *et al*. 2006). In this sense, our results corroborate previous findings about multi-stakeholder platforms that are captured by some groups of actors such as elites, administrative authorities and logging companies, resulting in upward instead of downward accountability (Lescuyer 2005, Olowu 2001, Oyono 2004b, Ribot 2002). We found that multi-stakeholder platforms should respond to the local communities concerning their actions in terms of information on activities carried out. However, financial dependence from logging companies somehow negatively affects the accountability of the representatives towards communities.

In addition, multi-stakeholder platforms seem to compete with customary institutions within the village. Lescuyer (2005) noted that power is held by some groups in the villages (family, lineage, elders) and it is these institutions that have social legitimacy in the villages and determine the behavior of the individual vis-à-vis new institutions. The advent of new institutions reflects the shift of powers of traditional authorities to new groups such as political and administrative elites, women, youth and marginalized groups (Karsenty 2008).

A suitable organization should take into account the customary institutions in order to be a credible representative for local community and a reliable partner for other stakeholders. Moreover, there is a wide range of pre-existing local organizations in the forestry sector in Cameroon. Each project or programme includes the establishment of a forum for dialogue which differs from previous experiences in terms of objectives, tasks and resources (Manor, 2005). Most of these institutions target various things such as management of wildlife, community forest, local development and the management of annual forest fees. The proliferation of institutional arrangements may potentially affect their effectiveness negatively due to the lack of synergy of actions and potential conflicts among stakeholders. Results also suggest that the well-being of local communities is positively impacted by forest certification. Logging companies developed new and improved benefit-sharing mechanisms as compared to those

legally mandated, such as extra payments on volumes of harvested timber. This form of extra payment is an outcome of forest certification inasmuch it exceeds legal requirements. On the downside, it must be noted that some of the projects carried out with such money seem to be unsuitable for communities for at least two reasons.

First, in some cases logging companies prefer projects that guarantee visibility to those reportedly considered more useful, albeit less immediately visible, by the local population. This trend may be fostered by the perceived needs of the logging companies to provide evidences of compliance with social requirements during surveillance audits. Indeed, logging companies are often faced with a dilemma. Either finance projects proposed by villagers, such as building community halls, although considered useless in terms of positive impacts on local development by the company, or unilaterally determine the type of projects considered to foster local development and ignore the support of villagers.

Second, we argue the approach used for such projects has a tendency to consider the community as a homogeneous entity where common customary use is the rule, while in reality individual ownership as well as socio-political tensions within communities are their main characteristics (Karsenty 2008). In this regard the relevant scale for implementing social projects should integrate both the individual and the community level if we consider that villagers do not have common interest concerning the type of project as well as the use of funds provided by logging companies.

CONCLUSION

This paper has shown that forest certification, as compared to the legal framework, can play a significant role in enhancing relationships between local communities and logging companies. On the positive side, we found that the requirement for logging companies to have 'social mediators' bridging the gap between them and the local population has contributed to increasing the number and the effectiveness of discussion platforms. Certified companies mobilize new human and logistical resources to implement and ensure the functioning of these platforms. In addition, certification pushes companies to invest more than the legal framework does in social infrastructures and income-generating activities. Indeed, sampled companies have all developed benefit-sharing mechanisms on top of those already required by the law, in order to enhance social well-being of communities.

Despite such positive effects, findings show that multi-stakeholder platforms are often still weak institutions with low legitimacy, vulnerable because financially dependent on logging companies, while the government remains mostly a disengaged party. The platforms' effectiveness, especially when compared to pre-certification times when companies adapted to the legal requirements, has increased, but efforts remain to be made in order for such platforms to become entirely credible interlocutors between companies and the local population. On a positive note, we found that in all cases certified companies are showing a 'work in progress'

attitude, recognising that the situation is not yet optimal, but with the aim to keep working to build and strengthen multi-stakeholder platforms. We suggest that, as a preliminary step to overcome the current shortcomings of multi-stakeholder platforms, it could be useful for logging companies to consider the distribution of power within the communities and to review the current top-down approach.

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