

The politics of forestland use in a cunning government: lessons for contemporary forest governance reforms

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SUMMARY

The stakes are high for tropical forestlands in multi-actor power relations because of their interdependence (climate change mitigation), their above- and below-ground resources (wood, mines) and their arable lands. In tropical countries, where the State owns most of the forestlands, many governments feel that any external initiative to change their forestland use policies infringes on their sovereignty. The governments' reactions to pressure for forestland governance reforms advocated by the international community may reflect the level of their national strength, international credibility and the attractiveness of offsets for forestland use conversion. Governments either use a tactic based on strength or on cunning, in the Machiavellian sense of the term, to impose their domestic agenda. Referring to the two last decades of forestland use policy reforms in Cameroon, this article seeks to understand why and how some governments of developing countries like Cameroon use cunning strategies to circumvent the implementation of undesired forest policy reforms while avoiding blame from the international community.

Keywords: politics, forest governance, aid conditionality, blame avoidance, Cameroon

Politiques d'utilisation des terres forestières et mode de gouvernement fondé sur la ruse : enseignements pour les réformes de la gouvernance forestière contemporaine

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Les forêts tropicales sont au centre de relations de pouvoirs entre de nombreux acteurs en raison des multiples enjeux qui y sont associés : interdépendance (atténuation des changements climatiques), accès aux ressources du sol et du sous-sol (ressources ligneuses et non ligneuses, minerais), potentiel de conversion en terres agricole, etc. Dans les pays tropicaux où l'État possède la plupart des terres forestières, de nombreux gouvernements considèrent que toute initiative extérieure qui les pressent à modifier leurs politiques d'utilisation des terres forestières empiète sur leur souveraineté. Les réactions de ces gouvernements aux pressions extérieures promouvant des réformes de gouvernance forestière dépendent de la solidité de leur pouvoir interne, de leur crédibilité internationale et de l'attractivité des compensations qui leur sont proposées pour conserver les forêts. Dans le but d'imposer leur propre agenda politique, les gouvernements peuvent ainsi utiliser soit une tactique basée sur la force, soit sur la ruse, dans le sens donné à ce terme par Machiavel. En analysant les deux dernières décennies de réformes de la politique d'utilisation des terres forestières au Cameroun, cet article cherche à comprendre pourquoi et comment des gouvernements comme celui du Cameroun utilisent des stratégies fondées sur la « ruse » pour contourner la mise en œuvre de réformes de politique forestière qu'ils ne souhaitent pas, tout en s'efforçant d'éviter le blâme de la communauté internationale.

Las políticas de uso de tierras forestales bajo un gobierno astuto: lecciones para las reformas de la gobernanza forestal contemporánea

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Las selvas tropicales están en el centro de las relaciones de poder entre numerosos actores, debido a su interdependencia (mitigación del cambio climático), a los recursos del suelo y del subsuelo (recursos madereros y no madereros, minerales), a su potencial de conversión en tierras agrícolas, etc. En los países tropicales donde el Estado es dueño de la mayoría de las tierras forestales, muchos gobiernos consideran que cualquier iniciativa externa para cambiar sus políticas de uso de tierras forestales es un atentado contra su soberanía. Las reacciones de los gobiernos ante la presión en pro de reformas de la gobernanza forestal, solicitadas por la comunidad internacional, pueden reflejar el nivel de su fortaleza nacional, su credibilidad internacional y el atractivo de las compensaciones para conservar los bosques. Los gobiernos pueden utilizar una táctica basada en su fuerza o en su astucia, en el sentido maquiavélico del término, para imponer su agenda doméstica. En referencia a las dos últimas décadas de reformas de las políticas de uso de tierras forestales en Camerún, este artículo trata de comprender por qué y de qué manera algunos gobiernos como Camerún, utilizan estrategias astutas para eludir la realización de reformas de las políticas forestales no deseadas y evitar que la comunidad internacional les culpe por ello.

INTRODUCTION

The growing global interest in biodiversity protection and the role of forests in climate change mitigation has led international actors to increase pressure to promote forest policy reforms in developing countries, especially during the World Bank (WB) and the International Monetary Fund (IMF) structural adjustment programmes and debt cancellation negotiations. The international actors including the largest non-governmental organisations and public aid donors concerned with environmental issues are mainly interested in promoting reforms in sustainable forest management (SFM) and forest conservation. Recently, the Forest Law Enforcement, Governance and Trade (FLEGT) agenda and the other climate change-related mechanisms such as the United Nations mechanism for reducing emissions from deforestation and forest degradation in developing countries (REDD+), have launched international initiatives for better governance of tropical forestlands. This mechanism focuses on carbon stock enhancement in addition to SFM and forest conservation (Karsenty 2008, Corbera and Schroeder 2011). Although REDD+ is featured as a hands-off mechanism (with most industrial nations committed to paying developing countries against verified results, disregarding how these results have been obtained provided that some agreed safeguards have been respected), international organisations and bilateral cooperation still condition their financial support to some changes in forest-related policies.

In most developing countries, the State owns the forestlands, and any intervention by international actors to promote forest policy reforms sparks off sovereignty arguments by national governments (White and Martin 2002, Ribot *et al.* 2006). Consequently, political resistance to policy reforms has become a critical challenge and an important barrier. In Cameroon for example, the full implementation of the forest policy reforms in the Forest Management Units (FMUs) was one of the key aid conditionalities recommended by the World Bank and supported by both the World Wide Fund for Nature (WWF) and Conservation International, CI (Ekoko 2000, Essama-Nssah and Gockowski 2000).

A similar perspective of the power play related to forest policy reforms has also been debated under the REDD+ regime. As mentioned by Santilli *et al.* (2005), in the earlier REDD+ proposal, the developing countries wanted the developed countries to compensate efforts made by the former's governments to curtail deforestation. Up to now, most funding for REDD+ activities has been provided through bilateral and multilateral aid agencies since REDD+ did not have a convincing, consensual legal framework, and the forest carbon market collapsed (Karsenty and Ongolo 2012, Streck 2012, Seymour and Angelsen 2012). With funding mainly provided from public sources, REDD+ seems to have adopted the *aid for forest policy reforms* model applied in the forest

sector of developing countries in the 1990s. By analysing the political behaviour of the national bureaucracies (i.e. the governments) of tropical countries like Cameroon that are facing international pressure for forestland use reforms, this paper aims to emphasise important lessons for present-day challenges of tropical forest governance.

Based on the case study of forestland use policies in Cameroon, this article explains why and how “cunning” has often been used by recipient governments to circumvent pressure in support of – undesired – policy reforms recommended by the international actors such as the aid donors. According to Machiavelli’s “art of government”, the cunning concept refers to the political skills of a government authority (the Prince) to manipulate institutions, people or the relationships with them, in order to maintain, reinforce and protect the power on a threatened territory (Foucault 1978). In most cases, the use of cunning in a power relationship may be a strategy for one actor (usually the dominated side) to resist the demand or influence the behaviour of the other (the dominant side)¹.

In the case of Official Development Assistance (ODA), Acharya *et al.* (2006) observed that the donors’ influence in recipient countries may be reduced by the proliferation and fragmentation of their policy interventions. These structural weaknesses appeared as an additional source of power for recipient governments seeking to avoid pressure from the donors. Killick *et al.* (1998), showed that the effects of the conditionalities imposed by aid donors on recipient countries in the 1980s and 1990s was not limited to the economic sphere. Conditionalities now link the aid agenda to the promotion of ‘good governance’ by recipient governments who are urged to enforce the rule of law, accountability and transparency in their sectoral policies. For some of the recipient governments, especially in Africa, the exploitation of disorder and institutional fragmentation reflect the absence of comprehensive policy coordination; chaos was just one of the political skills used to resist the undesired governance reforms imposed by aid donors (Chabal and Daloz 1999, Bayart *et al.* 1999, Mbembe 2001).

In the case of the forestland governance reforms, the issue of power relations between aid donors and recipient governments can be described as follows: aid donors want to change forestland use policies in recipient countries by paying for pressure that is exercised to reward or admonish recipient governments, depending how well the reforms are implemented. The donors’ two main objectives are: improving governance in forestland use for the purpose of more sustainable forest management and promoting forest conservation. But recipient countries try to avoid the implementation of the undesired governance reforms imposed on them by their powerful partners. In other words, the challenge for recipient governments is to avoid sanctions while trying to implement their own agenda for forestland use conversion.

¹ See Krott *et al.* (2013) for a detailed analysis on a power relationship between the “potentate” and the “subordinate” actors.

Following the blame avoidance theory first conceptualised by Weaver (1986), this article assumes that the failure of forest governance reforms in countries like Cameroon is largely due to erratic policy coordination and variety of disputes within the national government. This fragmentation of domestic forestland policies is skilfully exploited by the top echelon of the government to impose its preferences for forestland use conversion despite international pressure for policy reforms that promote SFM and forest conservation. The originality of this research lies in the use of the blame avoidance theory to analyse one of the critical factors of forest governance issues in developing countries: the endemic failure of forestland use reforms. The theoretical contribution of this paper is to reveal cunning as a blame avoidance strategy used by the Cameroonian government to avoid the success of undesired forest governance reforms or those perceived as externally imposed.

RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODS

In this paper we will focus especially on the power² relation between international aid donors and the national government with regard to the forestland reassignment reform policies in Cameroon. The term ‘power relation’ used in this context will

refer to what Krott *et al.* (2013) summarise as the capacity of an actor to influence the behaviour or action of other actors. With this in mind, we outlined how the government authorities manage to play important formal or informal roles in the (de)construction of the forestland use policies. Their formal influence has been derived from sectoral national laws, e.g. on forest, land tenure, environment and mining. While their informal influence has been identified from literature reviews, interviews and direct observation in the field (Table 1).

The analysis in this paper is based on a cross-referenced method that includes field observations, interviews and rich literature review (Creswell 2009). Research for this article, which was carried out between 2011 and 2013, started with a literature review to identify the reasons for the failure of the forestland use policy reforms in Cameroon, and the key actors interacting to manage this problem at the national level. Second, at the beginning of the research project, one of the authors organised a national workshop for some 60 participants, identified as the most relevant stakeholders of forestland use policies. The objective was to understand how forestlands in Cameroon were influenced by growing pressure on lands in tropical countries. Third, the data collection phase entailed semi-structured interviews, participatory observations and a review of unpublished document.

TABLE 1 *Mapping of formal and informal influence of Cameroon government authorities involved in forestland use policies*

	Formal influence on forestland use policies	Informal influence on forestland use policies
Presidency of the Republic	Top echelon of authority orienting the major governmental decisions on forestlands policies based on its discretionary power	Top echelon authority fostering uncertainty and ambiguity in forestland use policies depends on competing interests or hidden agenda
Office of the Prime Minister	Highest hierarchical authority for the signature of the major decrees of forestland concessions or forest conservation areas	A supra governmental hierarchy governing sectoral forestland use policies through (erratic) trade-off decisions
Ministry of Economy and Planning	Promoter of economic prosperity based on land rush including forestlands conversion National authority promoting sustainable development	A powerful governmental supporter of business companies engaged in forestland use conversion.
Ministry of Mining	Promoter of submission of forestlands to a mining code	
Ministry of Forestry	Main authority of forestland use policies (e.g. logging, forest conservation)	Major opponent to forest conservation reforms without substantial and concrete funding incentives
Ministry of Agriculture	Promoter of agricultural expansion on <i>available</i> forestlands	
Ministry of Environment	Proponent of greater consideration of environmental sustainability in forestland use policies. National authority of REDD+ process	Environmental authority with very little influence over forestland use policies
Ministry in charge of Land Tenure	National authority of land property (including forestlands) processes	Marginal authority over forestland use policies

² The concept of power is quite vague, but it can be briefly defined as the coercive capacity of one actor to affect the practices or the ideas of another (Weber 1921), or the capacity of a disciplining authority or practices to change the behaviour of people without any apparent coercion (Foucault 1978).

TABLE 2 Categories of respondents

Actor groups	Number interviewed	Institutional affiliations
National government	24	- Office of the Prime Minister - National ministries: Forestry, Environment, Economy, Planning, Agriculture, Mining, Land Tenure
International aid donors	7	- World Bank, German cooperation; French cooperation
Non-governmental organisations	6	- International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN), World Wide Fund for Nature (WWF), African Institute for Development (INADES Formation), Centre for Environment and Development (CED).
Private sector	7	- Logging companies (WIJMA, FIPCAM, CIM); Cameroon Timber Sector Group (GFBC); Mining company (CamIron), Carbon business Company (WWC)
Academic and research institutions	5	University of Yaoundé, University of Dschang; Center for International Forestry Research (CIFOR).
Total	49	

Forty-nine individual interviews were conducted in French, the preferred language of the respondents (Table 2). Quotations from the interviews have been translated into English for this article by the authors. Each interview lasted between 25 and 75 minutes, depending on the respondent's availability and interest in participating. Most of the interviews were individual and were conducted in the respondents' workplace. A few interviews with former key officials of international aid agencies, who played an important role in forestland use reforms in Cameroon in the 1990s and 2000s, were conducted by phone or by Visio meeting.

Participatory observation can be described as first-hand observation of decision-making on forestland use reforms through discussions within what Hufty (2011) called the *nodal points* of the governance processes. *Nodal points* are physical or virtual arena where a governance problem can be debated by actors concerned by the resolution of the problem. This has been done through participation in fifteen events held during our field missions including meetings, workshops and conferences on forestland use policies. To prepare a virtual observation of the nodal points, both the discourse and the policy positions of actor groups involved in forestland use policies have been taken into account (MINEPAT 2009, Dkamela 2011, Kengoum 2011, Megevand *et al.* 2013). Finally, the interpretation of what we saw, heard and understood in the field has been conceptualised using the framework of blame avoidance which we felt was the most appropriate theory to discuss the strategies of a "cunning government".

AN OVERVIEW OF THE FOREST POLICY REFORMS AGENDA IN CAMEROON BETWEEN 1992 AND 2012

Of the many policy reforms adopted by the government of Cameroon after the Rio World Summit in 1992, the 1994 forestry law has been the most important environmental policy reform. The innovative measures put in place by the forestry law were: the creation of a Forest Management Unit

(FMU) regime – see Box 1 – for more transparency and forest tenure enforcement in forest operations; the emergence of a decentralized management system through communal and community forests managements; and the creation of economic instruments for more equitable sharing of forest revenues from national to the local level (Egbe 2001, Topa *et al.* 2009). Although this forest law is regarded as the most innovative in the central African region, implementation is very poor mainly because of political barriers (i.e. elite capture, rent-seeking practices, the lack of independent countervailing power institutions to the government, etc.) based on underlying factors that lead to illegal logging activities, insecurity of forest tenure, and inconsistent forest decentralisation measures (Oyono 2004, Ezzine-de-Blas *et al.* 2009, Assembe-Mvondo *et al.* 2014). Recently, the spread of land grabbing in central African countries including Cameroon has increased the risk of forestland conversion for e.g. agricultural expansion and mining (Karsenty 2010, Feintrenie 2014).

The government of Cameroon is formally committed to including the REDD+ process in the climate change regime and has taken part in the negotiations on the REDD+ mechanism since the beginning (Cameroon-RPP 2013). Unlike the forest law whose regulations are binding, REDD+ is a voluntary incentive-based mechanism designed to reward governments or, in some cases, private project developers for promoting forest sustainability. More specifically, the United Nations Framework Convention for Climate Change (UNFCCC) defined REDD+ as a policy tool for reducing emissions from deforestation and forest degradation and for promoting forest conservation, sustainable forest management and the enhancement of forest carbon stocks (UNFCCC 2011). Except for the focus on carbon storage and enhancement, the REDD+ objectives of the forest policy reforms coincide with the objectives of the Cameroon forest law. The possibility to obtain aid funding from this mechanism has been one of the major incentives for the Cameroon government's engagement in the REDD+ regime (Somorin *et al.* 2014, Dkamela *et al.* 2014).

Box 1 – The Forest Management Unit (FMU) regime in Cameroon: Summary and Stakes

The official FMU allocation process seeks to reflect the determination of the government to prohibit other land-use activities such as forest conservation, agricultural expansion or mining. According to the 1994 Cameroonian Forest Law and related decrees (République du Cameroun 1994), forest concessions such as the FMU are awarded through a competitive bidding process with a minimum per hectare value of 1000 FCFA (about 2US\$). This floor price is determined by the Ministry of Forests and Wildlife (MINFOF), but the annual fee is set through an auctioning process. The attribution of a FMU is made officially through a three-step process that entails gazetting, provisional concession and a final concession agreement.

Gazetting (*classement* in French) is a legal act that integrates the forest in the Permanent Forests Estate, a pre-requisite for a State's land title. Thus, the gazetted forestland can be allocated to the private domain of other entities, such as a local municipality (*commune*) for public interest, social and economic activities or a private company for commercial logging. As mentioned by Kamto (2001) the gazetting act defines the status of the forest including the external boundaries of this forest, while the demarcation of FMUs refers to the process of establishing limits of spatial management units within forests that, in principle are already gazetted. The gazetting and the demarcation processes are essential, especially if the forest is fragmented into several FMUs. The **provisional concession** is a preliminary step that gives the awardee of the FMU a three-year preliminary exploitation authorisation. During this period, the concession-holder must prepare a plan for the sustainable management of the concession. The plan has to be validated by the governmental forestry service. The **final concession agreement** is the final document in the FMU allocation process and set out the concession-holder's long-term logging rights over trees listed in the terms of reference provided by the forestry department. It is a contract that is valid for a renewable period of 15 years, a long-term contract that requires an environmental compliance study and the construction of a timber processing unit in the logging area. The aim is to oblige the FMU awardees to invest and to commit to a sustainable forestry management process. The provisional concession is granted by the Ministry of Forests while the gazetting papers and the final concession are issued through a decree signed by the Prime Minister with the approval of the President of the Republic. Furthermore, the final concession agreement expresses the government's pledge to give priority to forestry operations rather than to conservation plans in a given area or the reallocation of the concession area to mining operations or agro-industrial plantations.

Cameroon is affiliated to the two most important multilateral funds that support REDD+ processes, the World Bank's Forest Carbon Partnership Facility (WB-FCPF) and the United Nations collaborative initiative on REDD+, (UN-REDD). The Government of Cameroon has also signed several bilateral agreements with the aid agencies of Germany, France and Japan for example which, via government channels, provide various types of financial support for REDD+ activities in Cameroon. This article will describe the power relations related to forest policy reforms between aid donors and the Government of Cameroon and will analyse the influence of the major aid funding programmes on changes in forest governance including the FMUs regime in Cameroon since the 1990s (IMF 2006, World Bank 2005, World Bank and WWF 2005, World Bank 2012).

In 2012, the dense humid forestlands in Cameroon covered approximately 21 million hectares, i.e., close to 45% of the country's total land area. FMUs (about 7 million ha) represented the most important component of forestlands, while forests conservation areas covered 5.6 million ha and community forests only 1.18 million ha. The rest of the forest was composed of commercial hunting areas, communal forests and forests of *national domain*, a term that refers to forestlands whose status is unclear but is mostly used by local populations (Mertens *et al.* 2012, WRI/MINFOF 2013, Beligné 2013, FAO 2014).

FOREST GOVERNANCE AND BLAME AVOIDANCE: A THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVE

The *good* forest governance promoted by international actors has led to various forestland use reforms in developing

countries including forest decentralisation, sustainable forest management and the extension of forest conservation areas (Ribot 2009, Agrawal *et al.* 2008, Mwangi and Wardell, 2012). More recently, the growing interest in environmental services from forests for climate change mitigation has reinforced international demands for tropical forest policy reforms (Engel *et al.* 2008, Agrawal *et al.* 2011). The success of these reforms largely depends on the country's institutional capacity, the degree of government commitment to the recommended reforms, and the economic/political clout of the country on the international scene. This article will focus on questions related to the following issues: What type of power relations related to the forest policy reforms agenda exist between international actors and national governments on the one hand, and among government bodies on the other hand? Why do some national governments, such as Cameroon, use cunning to exploit natural resources by developing private agenda opportunities based on discretionary land allocations, patronage and rent seeking behaviour?

From government to governance: Does the State still dominate the forests?

In the academic world, governance is broadly related to a fundamental question: Who are the actors involved in the formulation of public policies and how do they interact to implement these policies? (Peters 2012). In brief, the concept of governance refers to the processes of interactions and to decision-making to establish norms, involving different kinds of actors, that apply to a collective issue such as the problem of public goods (Boyer 1990, Rhodes 2012). Beyond the state

level, the substantial change in the manner of governing society using the governance approach is the increasing influence of non-state actors (NSAs) in making decisions on societal issues. The main NSAs are non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and private companies. In addition, the processes of global governance for managing complex interdependence issues, such as ecosystem services rendered by forests, have increased the relocation of political authority away from the national state level to the level of the international organisations (IOs). The traditional frontiers between national and international spheres have become blurred, and the partnership between IOs and NSAs has grown to wield greater collective influence in the management of global environmental issues (Smouts 2008, Kacowicz 2012, Orsini 2013). This is particularly the case for some policy reforms in developing countries where forest governance has been strongly influenced by reform agenda promoted by international aid donors and supported by NSAs. As mentioned by Humphreys (2006) for example, reforms to forest concessions and the expansion of protected areas in central African countries have often been recommended mainly by the World Bank in partnership with international NGOs such as CI and WWF.

Despite the growing power of NSAs and IOs in governance processes, Lynn (2012) emphasised that the State still has a variety of strategies available to impose its preferences. In the policy-making processes, this might be done by giving something with one hand, e.g. formally adopting an imposed policy reform, and taking it away with the other, e.g. not fully implementing it. Similarly, Stoker (1998) identifies the blurring of responsibilities (that could take the form of ambiguity in decision-making) as one of the key aspects of governance complexity. According to Gerry Stoker, the blurring of responsibilities, which often induces the failure of governance reforms, is a perfect example of what can lead policy-makers to using *blame avoidance* strategies to avoid sanctions or blame when they are at least partly responsible for the failure of the reforms.

The use of blame avoidance, as a dominant political motivation for decision-makers, is not a new phenomenon in policy-making. This concept was first meticulously conceptualised in political science by Weaver (1986). Since Weaver's work, a growing number of studies have focused on the many faces of blame avoidance behaviour in politics, public policy-making and public administration (Hood 2002, 2007, 2010, Howlett 2012). Most recently, this theory has been applied to analyse elements of policy reform failure in climate change governance (Howlett 2014). But to our knowledge, there is no research that uses the blame avoidance theory to explain the failure of forest governance reforms in developing countries. That is the original theoretical contribution of this paper.

The theoretical framework of blame avoidance has been conceptualised around the power relation in policy-making, based on incentives relation between two stakeholders such as voter and politician. Expressed in the simplest form, Hood (2002) considers it as a *blame game*, wherein the assumption is that one actor (i.e. the voter) can use his incentive/blame resource – the vote – to reward or sanction the second actor (i.e. the politician) for his/her action (or inaction) in favour

of or against reforms in public policy-making. Due to the asymmetric information between the two stakeholders, the voter has partial information on the real intention of the politician to implement or not the policy reforms promised or requested. Inversely, the politician does not know exactly to what extent his role in policy reforms might be incurred by the voter's reward or blame. According to Hood (2007), blame avoidance is often the main driver of political and bureaucratic behaviour in decision-making about any policy reform, because, instead of implementing *good* policy reforms, politicians or bureaucracies tend to adopt a distinctive set of strategies to avoid blame for policy failure and maintain the status quo.

There is no definite, current account in political science of the various strategies politicians or bureaucrats can pursue to avoid blame for their responsibility in the failure of policy reforms (Hood 2007). While Weaver suggests eight strategies of blame avoidance, Hood identifies three main categories (Weaver 1986, Hood 2010). In both cases, there are convergent factors of blame avoidance behaviour which are quite similar to the main stages of the policy cycle (Howlett 2012). In this paper, we will consider five types of blame avoidance behaviour which are defined on the basis of the main stages of the policy cycle: the influence of decision-makers/bureaucracy on the *agenda setting*; the tendency to take advantage of a *naïve policy formulation*; the attitude that fosters the *status quo in decision-making*; the tendency to *promote an erratic policy implementation* process, and the temptation of identifying (one or more) *scapegoats in the evaluation of policy failure* (Table 3). These five stages can occur in combined forms and in a non-linear or hierarchical process. Furthermore, a blame avoidance strategy reflects a certain degree of intention by the decision-makers to skilfully circumvent the success of any undesired policy reform or any reform perceived as being imposed (Howlett 2012, 2014). This intention can be observed through the decision-makers' tendency to exploit the *grey zones* in domestic politics by fostering ambiguity and uncertainties in public policies, e.g. internal disputes and tension due to competing agenda for forestland use policies within the government. This is what we call a "cunning strategy". In this paper, the notion of grey zone refers to any political sphere in which the poor or inappropriate regulation is implicitly replaced by informal rules and practices.

The notion of cunning in politics was first conceptualised by Niccolò Machiavelli, one of the thinkers who greatly influenced modern political philosophy (Machiavelli [1513], 1997). Friedrich Hegel, in his work *Reason in History* published in the 19th century, also addressed the notion of cunning and emphasised the fact that, behind the reasons which seem to govern a society, there is a skilful use of cunning which allows governments to achieve their goals even in an unfavourable context (Hegel [1830], 1953). According to Machiavelli, when a decision-maker or a government under pressure wants to keep control or power over a territory, all moral virtues and commitments are set aside. Depending on his/its capacity and the degree of uncertainties,

TABLE 3 *Hypotheses on political blame avoidance behaviour used in policy cycle of undesired reforms*

Circumvent tactics of change in reform process	Characteristics
Influencing the agenda setting	The decision-makers' or bureaucracies tendency to keep a reform issue off the agenda because of their preference for a status quo policies. When this first option is difficult/not possible, they usually try to redefine the problem to integrate in the agenda setting.
Taking advantage from a naïve policy formulation	For avoiding blame, decision-makers can tend to support or design policy measures that partially take into consideration the root causes of the problem at stake. The problem aspects 'forgotten' can be used further to contest the legitimacy of the reform for its weak contextual dimension.
Fostering status quo in decision-making	The decision made by the reform can consist of inducing marginal and reversible change to be replaced by policy inertia as soon as the short horizon (hidden) objective is achieved.
Promoting erratic policy implementation	The lack of political commitment for reform success leads decision-makers to avoid any timely clear decision or trade-off among their alternative options and competing interests.
Scapegoating other in evaluation of policy failure	Decision-makers will put forward various arguments to minimize their responsibility in the policy reforms failure in other to deflect blame to others.

Source: adapted from Weaver, 1986; Hood, 2010; and Howlett, 2012.

a decision-maker/government can use the *force of a lion* or the *cunning of fox* to achieve his/its goals. And depending on circumstances and on balance in power relations, a decision-maker/government may decide to use cunning if he/it does not have any or enough strength (Skinner 2000, Badie 2006, Zancarini 2008). In his essay on governmentality, Foucault (1978) discussed Machiavelli's view of the 'art of government' as well as the abundant literature that supported or criticised the underlying meaning of this concept which is related to the art of manipulating things and people. In a simplistic way, many of Machiavelli's critics contested the hypothesis that the art of government for any government authority was often focused to maintain the state hegemony and the reason of state including the need for political leaders to keep power and control over their territory and related resources. Besides the relevant positions taken by some of these critics, it is well known that respect of the state sovereignty, which includes government control over national territory, is one of the main concerns for any state.

In Africa, political analysts of the last decades of governance reforms have shown that the use of the cunning strategy was one of the most common tactics of national governments seeking to skilfully avoid the policy reforms imposed on them by international aid agencies since the 1980s. Postcolonial studies and the political economics of development assistance provide interesting insights into how recipient governments can employ their political skills including the "ruse" to sabotage undesired governance reforms (Hibou, 1999, Chabal and Daloz 1999, Bayart 1999, Olivier De Sardan 2004). Some recipient governments are even able to adopt democratic discourse to legitimize authoritarian practices: they formally adopt bureaucratic institutions to promote the general interest while privatizing the state bureaucracy to better protect vested

interests; they adopt the rule of the law principles while fostering ambiguity and '*administrative tolerance*' to circumvent the laws, and they acclaim transparency in their discourse while entrenching discretionary power and opacity in concessionary regimes of natural resources, etc³.

REFORMING FORESTLAND USE IN CAMEROON: BETWEEN INERTIA AND CHANGE

How aid conditionalities can more or less influence forest governance reforms

The agenda for forest governance in Cameroon over the last two decades was dominated by policy reforms promoted or imposed by international aid donors and supported by international conservation NGOs. The government seriously contested most of these reforms and viewed them as policy measures which threatened its sovereignty. But decision-makers were unable to reject them outright since the country was caught in the web of aid dependency. That was the case for the reforms to the FMU regime. Between 1994 and 2012, the government of Cameroon awarded 114 FMUs covering close to 7 million hectares of national dense humid forestland (Table 4). In the field, the FMU reforms were poorly implemented by a government whose decision-makers preferred to ensure that their discretionary powers would prevail in the forest concessions allocation process. In other words, most of the active FMUs in Cameroon in 2011 were operating somewhat at the margin of legality. Only 54% of the FMUs that had been allocated in 2011 had been gazetted through a decree of the Prime Minister and only 19% of them had received their final concession agreement. Formally, the lack of funding to

³ For an extensive analysis on African state dualities, see "on private indirect government", chapter 2 in Mbembe (2001).

TABLE 4 *State of Cameroon's Forest Management Units (FMUs) in 2011*

Categories of Cameroon's Forest Management Units	Gazetted		Declared		Total		% of FMUs
	nb.	Area (ha)	nb.	Area (ha)	nb.	Area (ha)	
Summary of legal status of FMUs in 2011	59	3,849,815	55	3,229,897	114	7,079,712	100
<i>FMUs Allocated and active</i>							
In final concession agreement, approved	21	1,337,916			74	4,650,261	19
In Provisional concession agreement with Management Plan approved	27	1,918,289	26	1,394,056			47
In provisional convention without management plan approved	6	255,371	15	754,743	21	1,010,114	14
<i>FMUs inactive and allocated or not</i>							
With Management Plan approved but abandoned	5	338,239			5	338,239	5
New allocation without Management Plan and to be gazetted			5	228,783	14	1,100,173	3
Not allocated and reserved for conservation (Ngoyla-Mintom)			9	871,390			12

Source: adapted from Mertens *et al.* 2012, MINFOF and WRI 2013, Beligné 2013.

compensate local people who were the victims of the FMU allocation processes was one of the main reason put forward by the government to explain the weak implementation of the FMU regime. Informally, the non-enforcement of the full legal requirements of the FMU regime (see Box 1) aimed to maintain “state patronage and other economic and political rent-seeking behaviour” as well as practices at the “margins of the law”, similar to what Wardell and Lund (2006) observed in Ghanaian forest politics.

To improve the implementation of the 1990s forest governance reforms in Cameroon, some international aid donors decided to use funding as pressure to persuade the government to fully implement the FMUs reforms. This international pressure was also used to obtain the expansion of forest conservation zones in some potential FMUs areas which had not yet been allocated. The World Bank (WB) and the International Monetary Fund (IMF) exerted the most international pressure on forest reforms-for-aid allocation. One of the principal conditionalities imposed by these institutions in the early 2000s was that all 67 FMUs allocated prior to January 2002⁴ receive their gazetting decrees by 2005 and their final concession agreement through a decree signed by the Prime Minister by 2010. In addition, the World Bank together with WWF and CI exercised pressure on the government to swap its initial plan to allocate the Ngoyla-Mintom forest for logging for a conservation option. In the second case, the global objective of the international community was to increase conservation zones in central Africa by 3.5 million ha in primary forest areas (World Bank and WWF 2005, MINFOF 2006, Humphreys 2006, Karsenty 2007).

While the country was suffering from funding pressure, it was also going through a political and economic crisis with a

debt trap that increased dependency on the aid donors. To solve the debt crisis, the government of Cameroon applied to the Heavily Indebted Poor Countries initiative (HIPC) designed by the WB and IMF towards the end of the 1990s. The country hoped to be eligible for this initiative which would provide a debt service savings of about US\$38 million on average over the period between 2006–2025 (IMF, 2006:36). For the forest sector, the HIPC initiative required the implementation of a series of policy reforms that included the improvement of forest governance through, e.g. sustainable forest management (Charlier and N'Cho-Oguie 2009). Another requirement was that the pending FMU gazetting decrees be signed. The World Bank changed the conditionality agenda in the early 2000s to try to obtain full implementation of the FMU reforms through an incentive grant for the Forest and Environment Sector Programme (FESP). The FESP was a multilateral aid programme of about 36.8 million dollars, validated in 2003 and managed by the International Development Association (IDA), a World Bank fund. The goal of the FESP was to support the implementation of forest governance reforms in Cameroon, including FMU compliance with the law (World Bank 2005).

In the case of Ngoyla-Mintom forest, the government formally adopted the donors' conditionalities even though they were perceived as external interference in Cameroon's domestic affairs. According to a senior officer of the Prime Minister's services: “without the World Bank conditionalities related to the HIPC initiative, the government would never have given up its initial plan to allocate the Ngoyla-Mintom forest to logging companies, since it is well known that forest conservation cannot provide all the benefits gotten from logging such as jobs, taxes, etc.”⁵ According to senior officials

⁴ The date of signature of the ministerial order defining the technical requirements of FMU processes.

at the Ministry of Forestry (personal communications, January 2013) this explains why the Ngoyla-Mintom forest was considered in the early 2000s as the “World Bank’s FMUs”. Having failed to formally reject the forest policy reforms recommended by aid donors, the government tried to skilfully combine the strategy to maintain the status quo by sporadically implementing the FMU reforms on the one hand and applying a short term economic prosperity agenda based on forestland use conversion on the other. Not everyone in the government agrees with each other; there are also reformers within the government who play a role in the adoption of the reforms.

In the latter case, the government tried to benefit from the difficulty to blame a developing country for seeking development (even by increasing its natural resources exploitation), after a very critical debt crisis that landed it in the HIPC initiative.

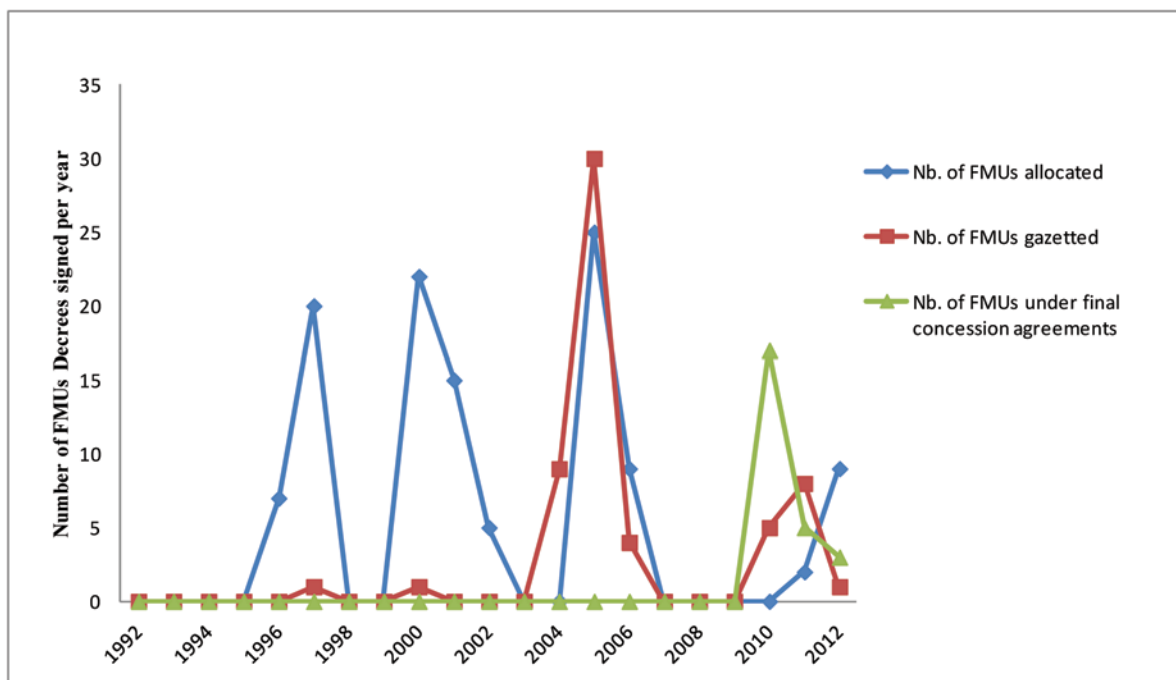
Adopting forest governance reforms while safeguarding the status quo

By implementing reforms, albeit sporadically, and trying to do as little as possible to satisfy conditionalities related to FMUs reforms, the government of Cameroon tried to capture as much aid funding as possible through the FESP aid programme and the HIPC initiative. How was this done? In the case of the HIPC initiative, the majority of FMUs that should have been gazetted since 2002, (to meet the HIPC conditionality for the forest sector), had still not received their gazettement

decrees in 2005 due to the lack of the government’s political interest to fully implement the imposed FMUs reform. But a few months before the 2006 deadline for that conditionality, the Cameroonian Prime Minister signed 30 gazettement decrees (22 in one day) to remain eligible for the HIPC initiative (Figure 1). Although the number of gazettement decrees signed was not sufficient (only about half of the number expected by aid donors), the aid donors felt that the government’s decision to sign a large number of gazettement decrees within one year was a step towards the full implementation of the FMUs reform. Finally, in 2006, as soon as the government had reached the HIPC completion point which guaranteed considerable financial gain for the country, it suspended the implementation of the FMUs reform until 2010, when a new deadline for implementing conditionalities of the FESP grant programme expired (Figure 1).

In 2010 the government started signing the decrees required for the first final concession agreements. Although the Cameroonian government supporters of the reform agreed with this move, the process was actually triggered by pressure from the World Bank, which had made it a prerequisite for releasing two-thirds (about 24 million US\$) of its financial aid to the FESP (World Bank 2005). In 2010–2011, as the 2011 deadline for this conditionality grew nearer, the Prime Minister signed about 20 decrees for final concessions out of the 60 pending (Figure 1). According to the World Bank assessment of the FESP programme, the failure of FMUs reform implementation was largely due to the government’s tactic to protect its discretionary power for further forestland

FIGURE 1 Cameroon’s Forest Management Units (FMUs) in final allocation process from 1992 to 2012



⁵ Interview carried out in the Prime Minister’s services in Yaoundé on 14 February 2013.

use conversion: “Both the Presidency (during the February 2011 meeting) and the Minister of Finance (during the 2011 spring meetings of the World Bank and International Monetary Fund, and on other occasions) made it clear that they did not believe that permanent allocation of land to timber companies would bring ‘sufficient economic benefits to the State’ (versus other land-use options)” (World Bank, 2012: 13).

The wave of forestland conversions: a challenge for contemporary forest governance reforms

In central Africa, forested countries including Cameroon have been speaking of economic prosperity stemming from accelerated land-use conversion for natural resource exploitation (Karsenty 2010, Feintrenie 2014, Megevand *et al.* 2013). This idea was taken from developing countries whose fast economic growth was supported by forestland conversion policies that promoted intensive logging, agro-industrial expansion and mining. In Cameroon’s economic strategy document entitled, ‘Cameroon, an emerging country in 2035’, countries such as Malaysia and Indonesia were cited as the model to follow for the national agenda for economic prosperity... (MINEPAT 2009). This agenda has already prompted forestland conversion of FMUs under the allocation process. e.g. MMG is a forest operator whose 125 568 ha FMU was gazetted in 1997. In 2012 17% of its concession area was reallocated to an agro-industrial operator to be converted into an oil palm plantation (BioPalm). Pressure to use this forestland for agro-industrial purposes was such that by 2011 it had still not received the final concession decree. The government had simply rejected the gazetting plans for certain FMUs because of the priority given to agro-industry, e.g. the agro-industrial plantations in the South-Hévéa project were expanded thus making it impossible to gazette the FMUs allocated in 2005 to GEC (28 931 ha) and *Société Forestière de Bojongo* (81 835 ha).

Furthermore, forest conservation for carbon sequestration is only considered by the government of Cameroon if it can contribute to the economic prosperity of the country through traditional channels such as taxes, jobs, added value, etc. According to decision-makers contesting the legitimacy of the FMU reforms, the major mistake of this reform agenda is to have forgotten that the government of Cameroon could go beyond external pressures and attempt to impose its forestland use policy preferences. “*Even the gazetting process and the final concession agreements are forest law requirements; we cannot be blamed for using our forestlands in a sovereign way depending on economic opportunities that may rise*”⁶. Along the same lines, the national REDD+ strategy document says: “*For Cameroon, REDD+ is a development tool that must help it to achieve the sustainable development objective that the country set for itself as part of the DSCE [Growth and Employment Strategy Document] and Cameroon Vision 2035*” (Cameroon-RPP 2013: 26).

EXPLOITING COMPETING INTERESTS AND AMBIGUITY TO AVOID UNDESIRE REFORMS

Our research shows that the government of Cameroon actually disregards the forestland use reforms recommended by international aid donors. Consequently, there is less of a political commitment that would facilitate the success of these reforms. The political intentions observed can be summarised by two types of behaviour: erratic policy coherence resulting from the *laissez-faire* attitude caused by competing interests within the government, on one hand, and the “scape-goating” game combined with ambiguous decision-making in order to avoid blame when the reforms fail, on the other hand.

Competing interests and the challenge of coherence in forest land-use policies

Cameroon’s highly centralised bureaucracy, which includes the forestry sector, is very anxious to protect its discretionary powers. The government strategy for land-use policies is based on an agenda whose priorities are not directly accessible to a layman monitoring public action. This style of government (rooted in hidden agenda) allows the various government agencies to compete with each other over a variety of issues that are related to different sectors. The public bureaucracy in this context is largely dominated by the private interests of the individual stakeholders. Cerutti *et al.* (2013) who analysed the governance of illegal logging in Cameroon, gave the following example: “the state officials may be collecting some 6 million euros in informal payments each year, part of which is siphoned into a pyramidal system that manages careers not by merit, but by the price one can pay”. In such a system, state officials are not sufficiently motivated to support reforms that promote transparency or equity and accountability in forestland use policies, since such reforms can substantially threaten the status quo, which protects their discretionary powers and privileges.

The three main options that the government uses shrewdly as levers are: (i) maintaining and promoting forest operations including commercial logging; (ii) promoting and facilitating the conversion of forestlands into other land-use activities such as mining or agro-industrial zones; (iii) promoting and consolidating forest conservation through environmental compensation mechanisms such as REDD+. The level of government interest in each of these options depends on their potentials: informally, to secure the private interests of state officials and formally, to contribute to Cameroon’s economic prosperity. The competing ministries however, understand that they must not cross a red line that can be defined as: any action that leads to the complete elimination of the options open to their competitors. According to Mbembe (2001, 2010), this form of government, which exploits disorder and institutional chaos to reinforce its discretionary power, is one of the modern forms of the postcolonial State. In some African countries like Cameroon, the cynicism of political

⁶ Personal communication with a senior official of the Ministry of Forestry in Yaoundé, February 2013.

leaders can lead them to punish conflict, illegal enrichment or the plundering of natural resources by the elites only when its own position of power is being threatened. This can explain why the *laissez-faire* attitude becomes a banal characteristic of government.

Fostering ambiguity to avoid blame: the case of the Ngoyla-Mintom forest

The case of the 9 Ngoyla-Mintom FMUs is a perfect example of how a government can intentionally use ambiguity to avoid the full implementation of undesired reforms while referring to a *scapegoating* tactic to minimise its responsibility in the failure of those reforms. The Ngoyla-Mintom forest, initially assigned for commercial logging in 1995 by the Cameroon government (Table 2), was reallocated in 2001 as a forest conservation zone because of aid conditionality pressures exercised by the WB through the HIPC initiative and the FESP aid programme. This option, strongly supported by conservation NGOs, was reinforced by the assumption that the Cameroon government would receive *environmental compensation* from international actors for the carbon storage services provided by the Ngoyla-Mintom forest.

Since this financial *carrot* was not respected and the majority of aid conditionalities related to the 2000s aid programmes have ended, in 2012 the government decided to return to its initial option and make the 9 FMUs available for logging. As soon as the allocation procedure for logging operations was started, the top echelon of the government cleverly allowed, and even urged the Ministry of Forests (MINFOF) that supported forest exploitation, to cross swords with the Ministry of the Environment (MINEDPED), which favoured the forest conservation option, including REDD+. The challenge for MINFOF was to keep managerial control over these 9 FMUs and prevent them from sliding into the portfolio of the ministries in charge of the environment, agriculture or mining, all of which entered the fray when their interests were threatened. Schwartz *et al.* (2011) reported that in 2011 at least 50 mining permits overlapped with FMUs covered by management agreements signed with the State. In the commercial forestlands, pressure exerted by ministries was officially justified by the necessity for each sector to significantly contribute to fulfilling the government's ambition for Cameroon to become an emerging country by 2035.

In April 2012, MINFOF was encouraged by governmental discourse on economic emergence and decided to open the 9 FMUs in Ngoyla-Mintom for exploitation and conservation. Since there were no legal provisions authorising the allocation of forest concessions as conservation FMUs, it probably seemed clever to appear neutral and allow the commercial logging option to compete with the forest conservation option. Since the 9 FMUs were the last primary forests in Cameroon outside the protected areas, MINFOF officials assumed that logging companies would be in a favourable position, and that they would be sufficiently motivated to make financial offers that would be more attractive than those put forth by the conservation organisations, which were

uncertain about the outcome of the UN negotiations on the REDD+ process.

In July 2012, MINFOF allocated 81% of the total Ngoyla-Mintom forest area to commercial logging and 19% to a mining company as a conservation area to be used as *biodiversity offsets* for mining operations. Since the results did not support conservation option such as REDD+, a group of international actors including the WWF, WB, and the European Union (EU) decided to challenge the results and pressure the government into choosing an option that would contribute to carbon sequestration activities, including REDD+. A very strong campaign was conducted to pressure the government. To back this informal method of lobbying, the EU office in Cameroon sent an official letter on behalf of the international community to the Minister of Forests to express "concern about the allocation process of the 9 FMUs in the Ngoyla-Mintom forest area" (UE-Cameroon 2012). Since the country remained quite aid-dependent, the government chose an ambiguous trade-off to avoid blame from the international community.

In August 2012, on orders from the Prime Minister, MINFOF made new decision namely decided that only 49% of the Ngoyla-Mintom forests would be authorised for logging operations. The top governmental authorities apparently decided to reweigh the options put forth by the various ministries but also to maintain uncertainty about the remaining 51% of the forestlands whose utilisation would be decided upon at a future date. Thanks to this ambiguity the government was able to maintain broader discretionary powers whilst leaving the game open to the competing options on its private agenda. MINFOF, for instance, used clever strategy by accommodating pressure from the international community for forest conservation while heeding the implicit preference of the top echelon of the government to push commercial logging option.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

For the last decades, international actors including aid donors have been trying to impose policy change in developing countries, especially in Africa, through what has been called the "good governance" agenda. The major donors required the recipient governments to introduce or strengthen economic liberalisation and institutional reforms such as respect of the rule of the law, accountability, transparency and environmental sustainability (Killick *et al.* 1998, Sandbrook 2005). In order to obtain full implementation of the governance reforms being promoted, aid donors adopted a set of what Bernstein and Cashore (2012) called the four pathways of the coercive or soft power instruments of influence used by international actors: international law, global norms and discourses, market-based instruments and direct incentives in policy-making. In the forest domain, these influential instruments were usually applied alone or jointly to increase the impact of international environmental regulations related to forests (such as the UN conventions on biodiversity and climate change) in developing countries. Because of the fragmentation of global forest governance and the weak

institutional capacity of many developing countries to successfully implement the international binding rules or to introduce market-based disciplines, direct incentives in domestic policies are increasingly applied in recipient countries (Biermann *et al.* 2009, Humphreys 2009, Pirard 2012, Gueneau and Tozzi 2008, Montouroy 2014).

By focusing on two sets of direct financial incentives used by international actors to influence domestic forestland use policies in Cameroon, we first illustrated how funding pressures based on aid conditionalities have been used by aid donors, via the *aid for forest policy reforms*, to try to impose the full implementation of governance reforms in Cameroon forest concession regime. Second, we provided evidence on how international actors try to prevent forestland conversions in Cameroon by promoting REDD+ as a profitable economic opportunity for the Cameroon government. This analysis may be also valid for other forest regimes such as FLEGT. In both cases, international actors were not able to deeply change forest governance at domestic sphere. One of the major reasons for this failure was that, most of the reforms largely ignored or minimized the complexity of the socio-political realities which constituted political barriers to the reforms in Cameroon and in some other forested countries.

As illustrated by Thomas and Grindle (1990), the challenge of policy change for donors in developing countries is less the agenda setting of policy reforms than the efficient implementation of these reforms by recipient governments. This is particularly critical when reforms considered “good” and desirable by international actors (e.g. promoting forest conservation) do not fit in with the preferences of the governments (e.g. forestland conversions for economic prosperity). Similarly, some economic lessons learnt from the politics of development assistance (in term of funding access and the need for realistic conditionalities for instance) are not sufficiently taken into consideration in contemporary forest governance reforms in recipient countries, which consider their own interests as fundamental to the success of governance reforms. Financial incentives can only play a small role in the reform adoption decisions and cannot “buy” agreement in the absence of political will, especially when these incentives are limited by the lack of sufficiently attractive funding or hindered by contested conditionalities.

Concerning the REDD+ process for example, Angelsen (2013) considers that when the aid donors interact with the receiving country with regard to forest governance reforms, one of the main challenges is to “*put money behind the promise*”. But this assumption can only be valid if the money put forward is significantly more attractive than the business as usual investments, as can be proven empirically by referring to the Norwegian bilateral experience of avoiding deforestation policies in Brazil and Indonesia. Furthermore, lessons from Norway’s International Forest Initiative suggest that financial promises from the international community that are not big enough to outweigh the powerful economic benefits of deforestation, can, nonetheless, foster political

coalitions that support forestland use reforms, as they give political weigh and credence to the reformers within the government (Lash and Dyer 2014). Therefore, the full implementation of governance reforms can only be sustained in the long term if the financial incentives are fulfilled according to commitments. Conditionalities, including financial pressure, can stimulate the implementation of short-term policy reforms, but unless the country itself assimilates the reforms as a result of the government’s political will, they will fade away when the formal requirements have been discharged. Along the same lines, some REDD+ analysts explain that the international community has chosen a *hands-off* approach (“we will pay when the job is done”), but that this approach is very unlikely to be successful in most tropical countries. Consequently, “*A re-thinking is in order. Both the government and relevant NGOs need to engage in constructive discussion about how the initiative can be changed so that a more proactive and hands-on approach is adopted*”⁷.

For broader contemporary forest governance reforms, such re-thinking must start with the needs and aspirations of the recipient governments whose fundamental priorities such as food security, poverty alleviation and economic prosperity must be addressed before and beyond any policy reforms that promote limited forestland use conversion. Thus, in recipient forested countries, a long-term co-investment perspective should be adopted to finance structural changes in agriculture, land tenure, rural energy, transport schemes and other land-use related policies. This should be an essential step in efforts to develop the governments’ political motivation for forest governance reforms as a part of a transition toward a “Green Economy” that could reconcile two objectives: growth (the ambition of “emergence”) and forest ecosystem maintenance and management (UNEP 2014). The co-investment principle should not be limited to a narrow performance-based reward (based on CO₂ emissions measurement) system advocated in the hands-off approach. The massive flows of public aid that would be needed could be obtained through international initiatives that bank on fresh money from sources such as carbon taxes, levies on international financial transactions, etc. In a word, the international community will have to make some genuine, difficult political choices.

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⁷ See the editorial in *Development Today*, on “Time to be ‘hands-on’ in forest initiative”, March 2014.

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