

Full Length Research Paper

Prevalence of environmental degradation in natural resource management

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The predominance of environmental degradation in Africa has generated waves of concern from international and national non-governmental organizations (NGOs). Since the 1990s there has been a remarkable increase in the number of NGOs with environmental protection interest in the South. The paper appraises the involvement of NGOs and stakeholder community in environmental protection projects in terms of resource mobilization, organizational strengthening and the institutional development of civil society. The paper which is a product of field investigations concludes that these NGOs are having a significant impact on the social, political and economic life of their populations. However there is the question of their sustainability as local NGOs derive most of their inspiration and resources from NGOs in the North. There is need to appreciate the issues surrounding capacity building beyond technical and sectoral aims. Capacity building must contribute to the long-term organizational strengthening and institutional development of civil society as a whole.

Key words: NGOs, civil society, sustainability, environmental protection, participation, appraisal.

INTRODUCTION

The past decades have seen steady growth of non-governmental organization (NGO) at the local, national and international level along with an increasing interest from both donors and the NGOs themselves in seeking ways to make NGOs more effective. The profile of NGOs has grown among policy-makers, activists, and researchers in both North and South (Abongwa, 1999). NGOs now feature prominently in discussion of service delivery, advocacy and lobbying, social movements, philanthropy and charity giving, building civil society, and social entrepreneurship. This rich diversity of NGOs in both the North and the South is widely celebrated, with a growing number of publications devoted to them. Although there are voices challenging the claims which are made for NGOs, these are generally restricted to the context of humanitarian assistance in emergency situations and NGOs continue to be "flavour of the month" in development circles (IRED, 1998a).

There has been a general and rising interest among countries on environmental issues, most especially environmental protection, since the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED) or the

Earth Summit, held in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil in June 1992. Theoretically, this conference expected countries to recognize the rather complementary relationship that exists between development and the environment. The challenge of environmental protection was made formal by the Cameroon government's recognition of NGOs as partners in natural resource management and rural development (Ndenecho, 2003). The challenge is that NGOs must perform efficiently in realizing local, regional, national and global environment plans, which means they must have adequate capacity and resources (Acho-chi and Ndenecho, 1994). This requires an appraisal of the financial means, sustainability of NGOs, cooperation between NGOs and GOs (Governmental Organization) in tackling natural resource management, the focus on the grassroots resource users, the degree of participation (empowerment) and the global dimension of the reflection/activities of NGOs. This paper seeks to identify NGOs involved in development work and to appraise the input in the natural resource management process by NGOs in order to establish a base for cooperation between local and international NGOs and to elaborate strategies in

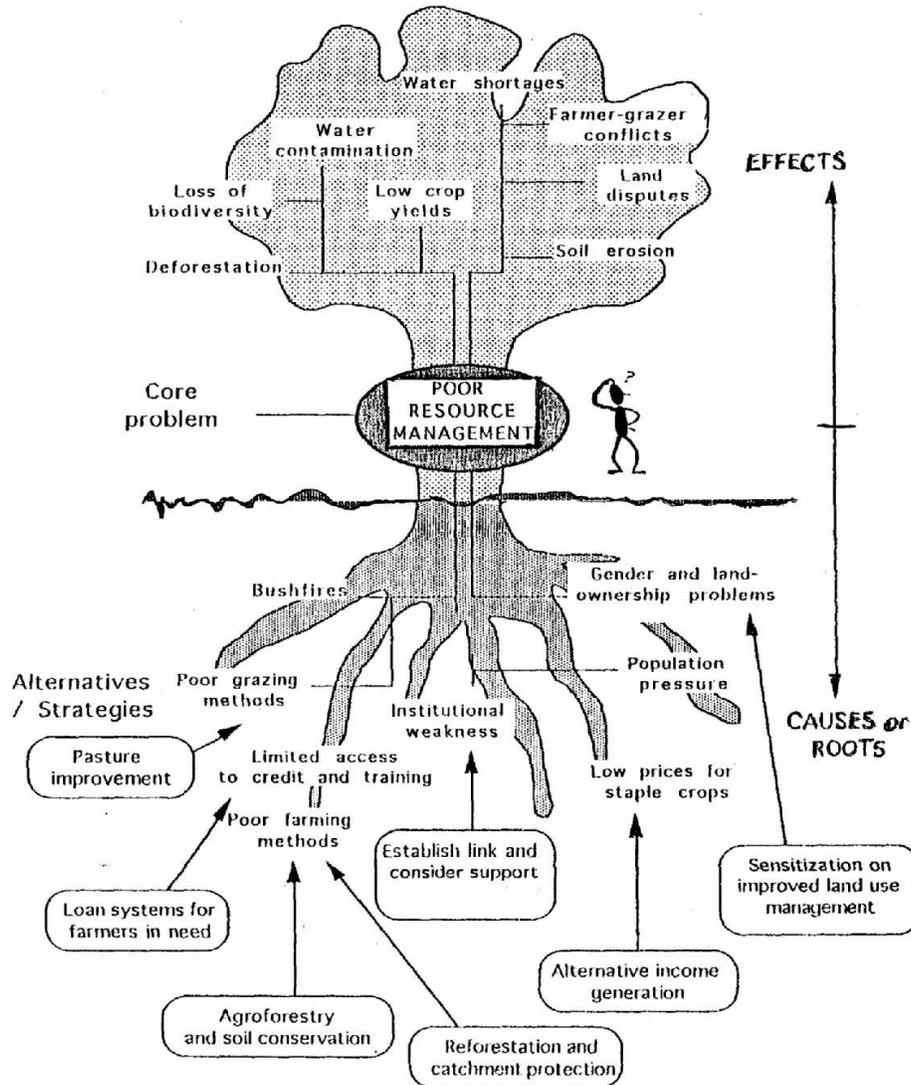


Figure 1. Core problem identification and strategies employed by NGOs in partnership with stakeholder communities (Zimmermann, 1996).

achieving sustainability through local resource mobilization, organizational strengthening and the institutional development of civil society.

Study area and core problem

The study area is the Bamenda Highlands. It is characterized by soaring mountain peaks, plateaux, upland watersheds and intermontane basins. There is a high lava plateau with elevations between 2000 and 2800 m, an intermediate plateau between 1000 and 1900 m, and a low plateau between 900 and 300 m above sea level. The montane forests of the area are unique in that they have one of the highest levels of endemism (Macleod, 1986; Stuart, 1986). Their scientific importance has received both international and local conservation attention from non-governmental organizations (NGOs). The up-

land or hilly watersheds have combinations of forests, farmlands and grazing lands and are densely populated by farmers (96 inhabitants / km²) with an annual growth rate of 2.3% (MINPAT/UNDP, 1999)

Since the early 1990s, road improvements have increased the agricultural value of the area. The increasing population combined with the increased market access has resulted in a much more intensive system of farming without the traditional fallow periods that were used to restore soil productivity. The end result is that crop yields are poor and natural forest is being rapidly cleared to augment impoverished farmland. The new lands are on steep and highly erodible slopes. These scenarios are analyzed in Figure 1. The decrease in fallow and encroachment of agriculture on to grassland has led to a reduction in land available for grazing. Consequently livestock range freely within montane forest

preventing regeneration and threatening some of the best remaining areas. Overgrazing and trampling have caused the complete loss of vegetation in some places. Serious erosion is now occurring, aggravated by deliberate burning. Over the past two decades there has been a noticeable decrease in the dry season water flow and many water catchments are being endangered by the destruction of the forest (Ndenecho, 2006).

Intensive conservation measures are needed in the area. Since the early 1990s there has been a remarkable increase in the number of non-governmental organizations involved in environmental protection in the area. These organizations design and implement land management measures based on the strategies are summarized in Figure 1. There is the tendency for these organizations to seek for additional assistance, most often in the form of finances from international donor organizations in the North.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Data for this study were obtained from the SNV sponsored project by Marion Wiendels (1994) and a study by Ndenecho (2003). Complementary information was gathered by interviewing one representative of each relevant organization. To be of interest in the framework of this research, an organization had to meet five criteria.

- The organization is active in the region at the moment, which implies that co-workers are either established on a permanent base, or are playing an important role in enabling organizations which are physically present to execute their activities. To be included, an organization has to have at least an office based in Cameroon.
- The organization is not a base organization. A base organization is defined here as an organization existing due to the initiative of the target population.
- The organization is either in direct contact with the target population, or works directly with organizations which are in direct contact with the target population.
- The organization aims at the development of the area.
- The organization is apolitical and non-commercial. These criteria include governmental and non-governmental organizations.

An inventory of organizations operating in the domain of rural development and environmental protection in the region was made using an established list of NGOs telephone directory and knowledge of organizations which are active in the region acquired through interviews and field surveys. The study set out to achieve the following research outputs:

- An inventory of organizations operating in environmental protection and rural development in the region.
- The geographical location of NGOs in the region
- The degree of spatial concentration of NGOs in the region
- Typology and roles of NGOs
- Weakness/limitations of NGOs
- Scope for achieving greater efficiency in sustainable environmental management and protection.

A case was made of the involvement of an international NGO (Helvetas) in watershed management in collaboration with local stakeholders and beneficiaries at local level. This is the case of the

Tubah watershed protection project (Table 1).

Typology and viability of NGOs

The field survey established the following typology of development organizations involved in environmental protection issues. This typology will enable us to evaluate the contribution of NGOs (Figure 2):

Membership Organizations (MO): These are farmers' organizations and are involved in agricultural development and marketing of produce. The main MOs are the Cameroon Cooperative Credit Union League (CAMCCUL) and North West Cooperative Association (NWCA). MOs mainly serve the interest of their members. The problem with some of these organizations is that for a long time they were organized by government officers rather than by farmers themselves and work for farmers but implement government policies.

Donor organizations targeting communities (DOs): These organizations are active in poverty reduction programmes at the grassroots. They started by giving aid to people in distress. Unfortunately, most of these have been more successful in instilling a dependency attitude among local people by making them to expect free inputs, tools and credit at favourable rates rather than in emphasizing the importance of improving managerial capacity. The main DOs include the North West Development Authority (MIDENO) and church organizations. In order to raise finances, they sometimes try to create the image that their target group is in a very difficult situation that will not improve without external support. Unfortunately, their target groups include poor people in complex, diverse and risk-prone environments where the agro-ecological and socio-economic situation is very difficult. They evidently lack the capacity to handle environmental and resource management issues under these circumstances. Most of them are isolated while others may assign projects to other organizations.

Community based organizations (CBOs): These are very active in the region and include: Farmer Groups, Forest User Groups, Bee Keeping Groups, Tree Nursery Groups, Common Initiative Groups, Villages Development Associations, and socio-cultural and development organizations involved in rural road construction projects, rural water supply schemes, community forest management, watershed protection, provision of basic village socio-economic infrastructure and rational use of village natural resources. Unfortunately, they face the same limitations experienced by grassroots support organizations because they are championed by local and external elites.

International NGOs and Public Service Organizations: These are international support organizations. They help membership organizations, CBOs and local NGOs through financial and material support, training and expertise. These are based in the developed countries but are represented in the study area to provide training and expertise. They also act as a channel to transfer donor assistance to local NGOs, CBOs and membership organizations. Those active in the region include AFVP (Association Française de Volontaires du Progrès), Bird Life International, Food and Agricultural Organisation, Swiss Association for Development and Cooperation (Helvetas), German Agency for Technical Cooperation (GTZ), Heifer Project International (HPI), INADES (Institut Africain pour le Développement Economique et Social), Netherlands Development Organization (SNV), and Plan International. Although operating under different legal statuses these organizations have the common characteristic of possessing high technical capacity and the financial means to implement its policies.

Local NGOs: These are local organizations receiving direct funding from International and Northern NGOs in order to reinforce local civil society through the development of new partnerships.

Several proliferate in the study area as there has been an emergence of a new generation of local NGO "contractors" since

Table 1. Inventory of organizations involved in rural development.

Code	Abbreviation	Full name (See Figure 2)
1	ACSD	Association Camerounaise pour la Santé et le Développement.
2	ACT	Association for Creative Teaching
3	ADEID	Action pour un Développement Equitable, Intègre et Durable
4	Africa 2000 Network	
5	AFVP	Association Française de Volontaires de Progrès
6	APICA	Association pour la promotion des Initiatives Communautaires Africaines
7	Bird Life	
8	BVCP	Bafut Village Community Project
9	CAMCCUL	Cameroon Cooperative Credit Union League
10	Catholic Church	
11	CBC	Cameroon Baptist Convention
12	CIPCRE	Circle International pour la Promotion de la création
13	CODIDSC	Comite Diocésain de Développement et d'Activités Socio Caritatives
14	DED	German Development Service
15	DETMAC ASSOCIATES	
16	EEC	Eglise Evangélique du Cameroun
17	FAO-PAM	Food and Agriculture Organisation - Programme Alimentaire Mondial
18	FIMAC	Financement d'Investissement de Micro-realisation Agricoles et Communautaires
19	GTZ	Gesellschaft für Technische Zusammenarbeit
20	Helvetas	Swiss Association for Development Cooperation
21	HPI	Heifer Project International
22	INADES	Institut Africain pour le Développement Economique et Social
23	Living Earth	
24	MIDENO	Mission de Développement de la province du Nord-Ouest
25	MINAGRI	Ministère d'agriculture
26	M1NASCOF	Ministère d'Affaires Sociales et de la Condition Féminines
27	MINEPIA	Ministère d'Elevage des pêches et d'Industries Animales
28	NWCA	North West Cooperative Association
29	ODERREB	Organisation pour le Développement Rural et Reboisement
30	ORICAA	Organisation for Rural Infrastructure, Community Animation & Afforestation
31	PAFSAT	Permanent Farming Systems and Animal Traction Project
32	PCC	Presbyterian Church in Cameroon
33	Peace Corps	
34	PRODEC	Programme de Développement Communautaires
35	PSMP	Provincial Social Marketing Programme
36	SAILD	Service d'Appui aux Initiative Locales de Développement
37	SASH	Sustainable Agriculture and Self-Help
38	SETRAHAC	
39	SLF	Sustainable Livestock Foundation
40	SNV	Netherlands Development Organization
41	UNV-DDS	United Nations Volunteers-Domestic Development Services.

See Figure 2 for the geographical location of the NGOs by their corresponding serial numbers.

the 1990s.

International NGOs have more financial resources than local NGOs, Donor Organizations (DOs) and Membership Organizations (MOs). They promote a great deal of rhetoric about partnership and enhancing civil society as they channel the majority of their funds to local NGOs through semi-contractual arrangements for service delivery projects. There is an exaggerated emphasis on specific sectors and services to the detriment of a wider strategy of funding

long-term goals, which cut across sectors, such as poverty reduction and strengthening civil society. Unfortunately, these funds are channeled to a very small number of local NGOs, thus several local NGOs present misshapen organizational profiles. The lack of financial means implies a threatened continuity, poor cooperation among the NGO community, poor integrative approach, and participation. The local NGOs have no international dimension. Membership organizations such as CAMCCUL, NWCA and Bamenda vega-

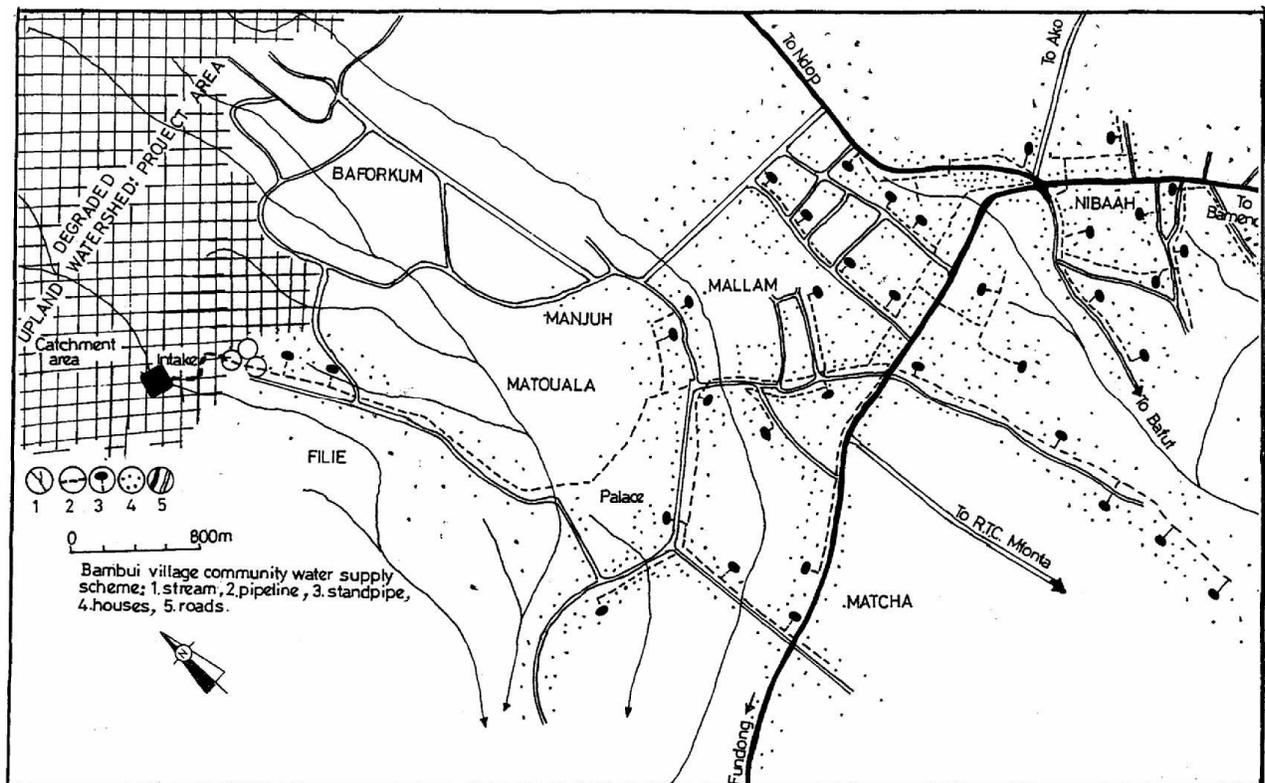


Figure 3. Layout of the Tubah Watershed Management Project: Model of a holistic approach involving the following sectors: institution building, forest management and conservation, pasture improvement, agroforestry and soil conservation, income generating activities, and a potable water supply scheme.

The physical and economic benefits, which will result from watershed improvement or improvement in land use practices, are forest conservation, forest management, afforestation, grazing controls, agroforestry and soil conservation. The NGO's strategies for watershed management derived from this study include:

- Development of local institutions: Formation of farmers' groups and federations in programme area, the formation of project and programme committees and training.
- Ensuring active participation by target population: Definition of roles of various population groups, participatory approach for planning decision-making, sharing responsibilities, promotion and communication. This also applies to equal access to benefits for all programme participants and active participation of all in the learning process. Women are empowered in land use management and production. This is accompanied by the development of self-help potential for the target population (formation of common initiative groups and creation of alternative income generation).
- Conflict management: Creation of forums and mechanisms of negotiation.
- This requires the setting up of a comprehensive and permanent monitoring system to allow proper control of activities in target areas.

The role of NGOs, local communities and civil society is crucial in achieving sustainable watershed resource management. The strengths of NGOs in this direction are impressive but can be exaggerated. Local institution building has proved difficult and it is common for projects to fail when NGO staff has departed. A key issue is how to build on local successes in providing services nationally. The danger is that Northern NGOs will be used even more actively

as channels for donor assistance, which would threaten to suffocate the flexibility, independence, and low bureaucratic costs that have made local NGOs effective. Helvetas is working alongside the government to develop the capacity of national NGOs. Training, technical assistance, networking to disseminate technical information among local NGOs and other activities are being pursued. However, it is difficult for local NGOs to know when financial support will be extended to them by northern NGOs like Helvetas (Ndenecho, 2000):

- Too early and it may weaken the self-help motivation.
- Too late and it frustrates attempts to move ahead with schemes for water supply.

The issue of sustainability and independence of local NGO therefore needs to be addressed. Partnership and participation are important in the relation between NGOs and the beneficiary communities as they are to those between the NGO and the government. If projects are to be sustainable and yield long-term benefits, communities must be more explicitly involved in design and implementation and in defining their own contribution.

Most local NGOs operating in the region have sometimes unwillingly incorporated older- style management ideas such as strategic planning now dismissed by development workers as having failed to live up to its promise when it was developed in the 1970s rather than heading for the most up-to-date ideas. The most up-to-date mainstreams management theory and practice is now concerned with areas which NGOs themselves should be on the top of flexible work teams, reduce hierarchies, building on organizational values and cultures. This should improve their effectiveness and generate new ideas and approaches-once rooted in different cultures and

values, and in a genuinely developmental approach to overcoming obstacles to positive social change.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The community of NGOs and civil society organizations is now far larger than they were a decade ago as it is increasingly being felt that they have more advantages than disadvantages compared with government agencies, which perform similar tasks. Donors and national governments therefore direct an increasing part of their funds through NGOs, which increase the likelihood of dependency on external funding with the risk of being more responsive to donor agenda than the need of their constituencies.

The issue of the long-term sustainability of NGOs is real. There is the fear that agencies funding NGOs in resource poor societies, where there is no evidence of medium-term capacity to absorb these costs, are simply reinforcing what some have termed the "global soup kitchen" or globalization of social welfare. There is therefore a need to focus attention towards the goal of sustainability through local resource mobilization. As of now there is no evidence in the country of such resource mobilization through tax-based state funding, local philanthropic action or income-generating schemes. Under such circumstances sustainability is simply a myth. On the contrary local NGOs are noted for their dependence on diplomatic services and perpetual support from international donor organizations (IRED, 1998b).

With globalization and international trade, NGOs have become increasingly influential in World Affairs and are consulted by both governments and international organizations. These organizations are having a significant impact on the social, political and economic life of their target populations. However there is the question of sustainability as local NGOs in Cameroon derive most of their inspiration and resources from foreign NGOs. In this way both foreign and local NGOs serve as agents of recolonisation rather than as liberators as they pose as new missionaries.

NGOs encounter a number of problems. Some local NGOs that gain access to official funds through related government projects geared at rural poverty alleviation report encountering confronting bureaucratic bottle-necks in their functioning which creates room for masquerading to gain access to official funds. The majority of local organizations suffer from a weak organizational network. There is need to appreciate the issues surrounding capacity building beyond technical and sectoral aims. Capacity building must contribute to the long-term organizational strengthening, or the institutional development of civil society as a whole.

Local NGOs also suffer from management problems. NGO leaders and staff are sometimes too reluctant to think about organizational questions because it might interfere with their primary task of using almost all funds

for working with poor people and should not spend money on administrative questions. A second set of problems revolves around the view that many NGOs are established by people searching for alternatives to mainstream thinking and there is sometimes the feeling that management issues could be dealt with on an ad hoc informal basis may grow in size and develop more complex, multi-dimensional programmes, and suddenly find that they need new ideas, systems and procedures to cope. Finally, as local NGOs have grown closer to official donors they have been required to develop new systems of accountability and their effectiveness has been questioned and challenged. This has led to the feeling that some of the impetus for the new interest in NGO management has come from the North, and has taken the form of an imposed "marginalization" rather than being part of a local NGO's own agenda.

As a result of the above factors, there is need for NGOs to confront the issue of their sustainability and to elaborate new management models.

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