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Women Strive for improved income, raise their voices in Natural Resource Governance

Though there exists a rich variety of forest resources in the East Region of Cameroon, women, especially those living in communities adjacent to protected areas, still wholly depend on their spouses for household income.

This renders them vulnerable to different forms of abuses and weakens their voices in their households. This situation has stimulated deep reflection amongst the women folk and civil society organizations (CSOs).

One of such CSOs, AAFEEN, a WWF Cameroon partner, recently, carried out an assessment on women's involvement in forest resources management platforms, such as the Village Forest Management Committees, Wildlife Management Committees, and Forest Revenue Management Committees, in order to better understand their role in natural resources management and what benefits they derive from their involvement.

The assessment revealed that, women perceive they were being sidelined and overshadowed by men from these forest management platforms and other projects.

They were mainly male dominated arrangements, coupled with issues related to mismanagement of income that accrued from forest resources.

Discontented, the women started pondering how to begin doing things on their own for income, instead of continuously relying entirely on men.

This thinking from women, inspired another study that was carried out by AAFEEN. The study analyzed the main forest-related activities that women are involved in, and which could be supported to improve their income-base.

The results revealed that, women were very resilient in the Non-Timber Forest Products (NTFPs) sector.

With available resources, AAFEEN began technically supporting the women on NTFPs collection and sales. They began by organizing hands-on training on the sustainable methods of collecting NTFPs. This activity motivated the German Agency for International Cooperation (GIZ) to donate an NTFP transformation mill to the women.

The aim was to help women in the processing and transformation of NTFPs. Unfortunately, the women were not still obtaining considerable benefits.

This was mainly due to the fact that they collected NTFPs at a very small-scale, coupled with their weak bargaining power, especially as they operated on individual basis, but perhaps more importantly because the transformation mill had not gone operational.



In early 2020, AAFEBEN signed a partnership agreement with WWF Cameroon. Through it, they benefited from the financial support of the Leading the Change (LtC) project that was funded by WWF Sweden, with initial funds from the Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency (Sida).

The support focused on the sustainable management and commercialization of NTFPs in targeted communities around some WWF-supported protected areas in the TRIDOM landscape from 2020-2023. This changed the phase of the project and lifted it to a higher dimension.

In order to get women to work as a strong unit, but also as a strategy to avoid male domination so that women should have control over the market for their NTFPs, as well as secure their rights, AAFEBEN mobilized and organized them into associations and also embarked on an NTFP market survey.



Creation of cooperatives

AAFEBEN organized trainings with the women's associations, who were able to organize group sales, negotiate better prices for their NTFPs and began realizing some improved sales.

They did not want prices to be imposed on them by the NTFP buyers, thereby avoiding a “buyers’ market” situation. This reflection led to the creation of three cooperatives - Or Vert de Mambélé (OVM), around the Lobeke National Park, Centre Vert de Lomié (CVL), around the Dja Wildlife Reserve, and Or Nature de Yokadouma (ONY), around the Boumba-Bek National Park.

To make them more inclusive, the cooperatives registered women and men, particularly the ones who were willing to cooperate with the women, from both the Indigenous Baka and the Bantu origins. However, most of the women belonged to the cooperatives as a unit i.e. within the framework of their association.



Processing Djansang starts with washing and boiling

The cooperatives were responsible for collection and storing of large quantities of NTFPs from their members and to negotiate better NTFP prices for significant benefits.

This strategy gave the women the opportunity and space to gradually begin pushing for their role at the center stage, making their voices heard, even in the midst of men.

However, women continued to face challenges given that their income-base still remained low, especially at household level. Also, although there had been a relative shift in men's imposing role, it still remained a cause for concern.

There is a need to further improve women's income-base to levels that would impact more on their individual lives and on

power dynamics within their respective households in particular, and the landscape in general, as far as the management of natural resources is concerned.

That notwithstanding, today, there are some encouraging signs that reveal that women are beginning to be a dominant force in the management of NTFPs in most parts of the landscape.

Apart from beginning to occupy key positions that includes financial management, holding key roles of responsibility within the cooperatives, they are also getting deeply involved in the decision-making process of the cooperatives.



Bantu and Baka cooperative women preparing Djangsang for sale

Women building resilient Non Timber Forest Product Value Chain in Southeast Cameroon

Women living adjacent to protected areas in the TRIDOM and TNS transboundary landscapes in the East Region of Cameroon are striving to make considerable financial contributions in their respective households in order to reduce male economic domination both at household level and in public.

This quest has contributed to the birth of three Non timber forest products (NTFP) cooperatives in both landscapes, namely Centre Vert de Lomié (CVL), Or Vert de Mambele (OVM), and Or Nature De Yokadouma (ONY).

Early in 2020, the cooperatives were at the peak of difficulties due to limited revenue generated from the sales of NTFPs. Fortunately, these challenges begun receiving more attention when WWF Cameroon signed a partnership agreement with AAFEBEN for the implementation of the Leading the Change (LtC) project.

During the implementation of the project activities, AAFEBEN realized that the three cooperatives, CVL, OVM, and ONY, faced severe difficulties partly because they did not have the required technical and institutional capacity to manage the affairs of the cooperatives.

They also lacked the knowhow to process NTFPs into other finished products, despite the support of two processing units donated to them by the German Agency for International Cooperation (GIZ) in 2019. The processing units were set up in Yokadouma and Lomié for the benefit of all three cooperatives.

With financial and technical support from WWF Cameroon, through the LtC project, a series of workshops were organized by AAFEBEN to strengthen the capacity of these cooperatives, especially in the sustainable harvesting and commercialization of NTFPs and also on how to effectively process and transform them into different products in order to add value to their business.



"In addition to the training, AAFEBEN provided them with some institutional support to acquire basic equipment that facilitated the process of transforming NTFPs into other products.

This enabled the cooperatives to acquire packaging and brand materials, relevant equipment and a power generator. Today, the cooperatives are able to process and transform different NTFPs into various finished products.

We are proud to see them transforming Moabi (*Baillonella toxisperma*) into oil. Bush mango (*Irvingia gabonensis*) into butter, paste and powder, and Djansang (*Ricinodendron heudelotii*) into oil and powder. And deriving considerable benefits"

AKONGONGOL Epse MIKAM MIRANDA,
Director, AAFEBEN

This has added more economic and financial value to the different NTFP species. For instance, prior to engaging in NTFP transformation, 96kg of un-transformed bush mango was bought by the cooperatives at 72,000 XAF and sold at 96,000 XAF, with a benefit of 24,000 XAF.

When they began with NTFP transformation, the same quantity of bush mango bought at 72,000 XAF and processed into oil, produces a minimum of 45 liters of oil, and sold at 5,000 XAF per litre. This generates a total of 225,000 XAF, with 153,000 XAF as benefit, higher than 24,000 XAF benefit when sold unprocessed.

AAFEBEN's technical support through the LtC project has also enabled the cooperatives to promote consumer protection ideals and good quality control of their products.

They ensure that the products are processed, bottled and sealed in good hygienic conditions and attractively labelled and displayed in Bertoua, the largest city in the East Region of Cameroon.

Though these products are known to contain very high medicinal, nutritive, and a fairly high economic value, they are still not well-known at the local level and considerably, at national level.



In a bid to increase the cooperatives product diversity, market-base, and profitability, AAFEEN began identifying other ways that these cooperatives can start transforming the NTFPs into other finished products apart from the oil, butter, and paste.

To achieve this, AAFEEN selected and sensitized 30 women, comprising members and non-members of the cooperatives, who are active in the NTFP transformation initiative, on the importance of transforming NTFPs into different forms of cosmetic-related products.

After the training, six of the 30 women, expressed the desire to begin the transformation of NTFPs into cosmetics.



Cooperative members at a training session with AAFEEN

YOKA, A New Cosmetic Brand



A display of some packaged products of YOKA cosmetic brand

With the objective of launching a cosmetic brand and to upgrade their cosmetic products, the women requested for further training from AAFEBEN.

AAFEBEN heeded their request and it led to the birth of a cosmetic brand known as YOKA. An initiative which is the first of its kind in the East Region, and perhaps in Cameroon. So far, products processed by the Yoka cosmetics have been receiving favorable feedback from consumers.

These women are today conveniently producing over 100 bottles each of organic cosmetic products, such as body lotions, shower gels, bathing and laundry soaps, hair shampoos and creams entirely from NTFPs.

Also, apart from employing six paid part-time women, they have attracted four shareholders, and managed to maintain their start-up capital of 600,000 XAF.

The major challenge both Yoka and the cooperatives encounter, is the low demand for their products due to insufficient publicity and very limited knowledge of the products nationwide.

AAFEBEN will not only continue to strengthen stakeholders' capacity on the NTFP value chain, but will also work with other like-minded CSOs to jointly advocate for financial and material support from the public and private sectors.

They will also advocate for the integration of NTFP value added products into the regional and local councils' development plans to enable Indigenous People and Local Communities (IP&LCs) to continue benefiting from their NTFP efforts.



AAFE BEN and her partners, are determined to continue with this initiative because the products are organic and are produced directly from NTFPs gathered from the primary forests.

We will increase public awareness by engaging in vigorous publicity and marketing of the products in order to increase demand.

We also plan to support the opening of more sales points in other towns, so as to expand the market.





Mount Cameroon National Park - Finding solutions to curb Human Elephant Conflict

Human Elephant Conflict (HEC) has been on the rise for several years now in and around Mount Cameroon National Park (MCNP), in South-West Cameroon.

The conflict, however, became too rampant in 2021 and 2022, particularly in the West Coast and Bomboko Clusters, as these forest elephants (*Loxodonta cylcotis*) were seen almost on a weekly basis in the heart of communities around the MCNP.

This posed a very serious threat not only to humans but also to elephant life, as people started to think about retaliatory killings.

Despite several management measures taken by the Programme for the Sustainable Management of Natural Resources for the South West Region (PSMNR-SWR), a Development programme of the Republic of Cameroon, co-financed by the Federal Republic of Germany through KFW, the elephants have continued to visit the community agricultural farms.

On the request of the Regional Delegate of the Ministry of Forestry and Wildlife (MINFOF) for the South West Region, a Human Elephant Conflict (HEC) management strategy, based on the Safe Systems Approach, has been developed, pending validation and implementation.

In the meantime, WWF Cameroon, together with MINFOF and PSMNR, is systematically sharing developments on the HEC situation in the Mount Cameroon National Park area with the Park managers and the WWF Network and also holding discussions with relevant local resource persons.

As a follow up to these discussions, Dr. Thomas Breuer, Senior Program Officer in charge of Central & West Africa at WWF Germany and WWF's African Forest Elephant Coordinator, made a brief but in-depth field visit to Mt Cameroon in June 2023.

The very tight trip schedule consisted of: community meetings, field work and training of community members in setting up camera traps, elephant monitoring and data collection analysis, and feedback to stakeholders amongst others.



The aim of our visit is to better understand the issues underlying the HEC in and around Mount Cameroon National Park Area.

And also to examine the extent to which the lava flows of 1982 and 1999 have affected substantial habitat loss for elephant.

Highlights of the trip in pictures - An exquisite view of Mt Cameroon



First camera trap photos captured during the trip



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