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From misunderstanding to promising partnership

It was a good ride from the coastal city of Limbe to Nkongsamba, a small town just next to the Proposed Mount Muangenguba Forest Reserve in Cameroon.

Our team was on their way to train the Parent-Teacher Association (PTA) of Nsong Primary School in a planned workshop when an issue was raised concerning the creation of a Sustainability Centre financed by the Swedish International Development Agency (Sida) under the Civil Society Project “Leading the Change, Civil Society, Rights and Environment”.

The Sustainability Centre, that was under construction up at Nsong Primary School, is part of WWF’s vision of working for a world where humans and nature thrive together.



Partial view of the uncompleted sustainability centre



Everything seemed set, and community members had bought the idea of the Sustainability Centre. Members of the community, teachers and pupils were involved in discussions that led to the choice of constructing the building at its present location in the primary school.

The centre, though managed by the school, is open to the general public and is aimed at encouraging inspired pupils and community members to demonstrate their environmental concern by developing and displaying models that promote conservation and sustainable development.

At Manjo, about halfway to our destination, Nkongsamba, we received a phone call from the chief of Nsoun in Manjo Sub-Division of the Littoral Region of Cameroon. “Stop that work in the school. Don’t build that house there. Remove it from there”.

We tried to explain to the chief that the building is a Sustainability Centre which is part of the school estate, but he was impatient. “I’ll destroy it. I give you one week. Remove that house from that position before I go there and destroy it,” the Chief insisted.

At this point we realised that what the Chief needed was a proper explanation and that we hadn’t involved him properly in the consultation process. We were determined to get it right.

The next day, the Chief sent a representative and we held a meeting to discuss the matter. The envoy presented the position of the Chief, highlighting how they felt left out and why they thought the building should be moved to a different position.



Ewane Nkwelle, dynamic Prime Minister of Nsoung Primary School

Our team then explained the process that led to positioning the centre at that spot, and that it is part of the school plan to support effective implementation of Education for Sustainable Development at the school.

It became clear to us that we hadn't properly analysed all the stakeholders of the school - there are more people with influence, and having only the PTA on board was not enough.

But the frank and open discussion helped to calm the waters. The representative was now on board and promised to brief the chief on the issue.

"I'm proud to see the beautiful compound," he said. "Thank you, WWF, for supporting the PTA to improve on the school. It is now a reference in Manjo Sub-Division and beyond. I have seen so many visitors admiring the school, and this is a pride to us," he disclosed.

From now on, things went smoothly. The headmaster and the PTA invited us to a meeting to plan a fundraising event as part of a celebration to mark the achievement of Ecole Publique de Nsoung as the first ESD model school in Cameroon. This time we advised them to also invite the Chief and his representatives to the planning meeting.

The representative was very active during the meeting, making contributions to make the planned event succeed.

"I will personally be home, a day or two before, to interact with the pupils in order to inspire them to work hard in school and grow up to make a difference. I will also summon a meeting of external elite to prepare them for the fundraising event," he promised.

He also promised that during the meeting with the elite, he would ensure that they discussed projects to further support the development of the school.

For us at WWF, it is clear that projects like the Sustainability Centre can only work if all the stakeholders involved buy into the vision and make it their own, which is why we had put a lot of time into consulting with the main stakeholders.

The oversight of not involving the local Chief and his representatives, however, had almost jeopardized the project. The lesson we learnt in this process is an important one, and will guide us going forward.

We are a learning organization always striving to do better, and setbacks help us to reassess how we work and do better next time - for the benefit of nature and people.

Bakossi National Park: 19 communities make strides in conservation and Development

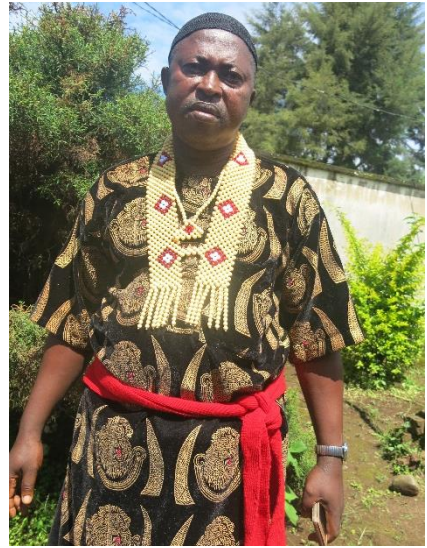
Created in 2007 and located in the South West Region of Cameroon, the Bakossi National Park (BNP) has been mapped out into four clusters, in order to ease activity implementation for greater conservation and development impacts.

Recently, WWF Cameroon, in partnership with the Program for Sustainable Management of Natural Resources, South West Region (PSMNR-SWR) of Cameroon and the Food for Rural Development Foundation (FORUDEF), facilitated the signing of two protected area Cluster Conservation and Development Agreements (CCDAs), involving 19 communities from two of the four clusters (the South East and North East clusters) of the BNP.

This is the first of its kind since the Park's creation, and will help to steer the course of conservation and development activities in and around the Park.

“Our communities’ active involvement in the negotiation and elaboration of these agreements and their six-monthly action plans is a strong sign that the development we have been waiting for will follow. The contents of these agreements, if respected, represent the key that would open the door and lead our people out of the poverty we have been enduring for several decades,” said Chief Nnode Tobias Ewang.

The CCDA is a guiding framework for empowering and building a stronger and deeper alliance between the protected area service and the local communities, through the collaborative management of natural resources in the protected area and its periphery.



Chief Nnode Tobias Ewang, Nzimheng Village, Cluster Facilitator of the South East Cluster of the BNP.

With 76 elected local community members of the BNP, four from each of the 20 communities’ Village Forest Management Committees, the agreement empowers the local communities to define their contribution to the preservation of high conservation value forest areas within their cluster conservation zones.

It also gives them the greenlight to bargain and advocate for their access and management rights to natural resources and for meaningfully linking conservation efforts with community development aspirations.



"This approach fits into the WWF Leading the Change: Civil Society, Rights and Environment's and the PSMNR-SWR projects' agendas, but also represents a win-win approach that benefits communities around protected areas through the management of natural resources," Tabe Moses Ncho, Director of FORUDEF

Mainstreaming CCDAs into Council Development Plans and Protected Area Management Plans is a huge step towards sustainability.

And according to Mr. Etone Martin, Coordinator of Community Action for Development (CAD), a partner CSO, "CSOs can also play a central role in the sustainability of the collaborative management process, as the approach empowers local CSOs as implementers of conservation and development action plans."

Mr. Etone disclosed that CAD has already begun contributing to the implementation of one of the activities captured in both CCDA

action plans and the development of a community-based sustainable tourism strategy for the Bakossi-Banyang Mbo Landscape.



Mr. Etone Martin, Coordinator of Community Action for Development (CAD)

"In our collaboration with the fringe forest communities adjacent to protected areas, there is no reinvention of the wheel, as the ideas, rights and obligations of the communities are defined by the communities themselves, taking into consideration their customs and tradition, and I call this traditional conservation," said Dr. Eta Agbor Hans, Conservator of the Bakossi National Park.

The signing of these two CCDAs in the Bakossi National Park came after the signing of five others with nine and eleven local communities in the Korup National Park and the Banyang Mbo Wildlife Sanctuary, respectively.

Communities taking lead in planning and deciding conservation and development actions

This story began after WWF, in collaboration with the Program for Sustainable Management of Natural Resources (PSMNR), facilitated a workshop with one of four clusters (the South East Cluster) that make up the Bakossi National Park in the South West Region of Cameroon.

The workshop was aimed at strengthening the institutional setup and to elaborate on the key natural resources management and development issues of the cluster.

It also provided the occasion to set the basis for eventual negotiation and signing of a Cluster Conservation and Development Agreement (CCDA) between the Park and the cluster in question.

Mobilizing local communities for impactful conservation and development actions is one of the most interesting activities to be involved in today.

The South East Cluster constitutes eight communities and each community was invited to be represented in the workshop by their Chief and a key member from their Village Forest Management Committee (VFMC).

One of the key recommendations of the workshop was for the representatives of these communities to give feedback on the workshop discussion on their return to their respective communities and also to share their feedback reports with the Park service, WWF, PSMNR and Food and Rural Development Foundation (FORUDEF), a partner CSO under WWF's "Leading the Change" project.



"Honestly, it is a special learning experience, and sometimes we rush into the conclusion that we are experts in providing local community solutions to socio-economic issues, while local people themselves have their own ways of dealing with issues," Theophilus Ngwene, Program Executant, WWF-CFP.

The community feedback meetings were successfully organized, reports shared as agreed, except for that of Mbuogmud II community.

"When I invited my people to give them feedback on the meeting, there was total disagreement. I was accused of taking a unilateral decision, without consulting the rest of the community, who accompanied me to the workshop," said Chief Ekinde Peter Mesue of Mbuogmud II.

Fining the Chief

Despite the representative trying to mediate the situation, the Mbuogmud II community went ahead and slammed the Chief and the community representative with a fine worth 300USD each in the form of a pig and some other charges.

Cluster Platform members of the other seven communities met separately, and proposed the organization of the maiden edition of the South East Cluster Platform Coordination meeting in Mbuogmud II village, with one of the key points being, the discussion on the deadlock in Mbuogmud II village.

Traditionally, Cluster partners, such as WWF and the Park service, only attend Cluster Platform Coordination meetings strictly on invitation. Like most other Cluster organized meetings, the Park service, FORUDEF and WWF, were not invited.

However, the Chiefs of the seven communities and their cluster executive members were represented at the meeting in Mbuogmud II village.

They successfully addressed the issue, with the village hatchets and discrepancies buried till date.



Women participate actively in Natural Resource mapping within the Bakossi National Park villages

Solving problems the traditional way

When intra- and inter-community disagreements persist, the Bakossi people – who consist of the most populated ethnic group in the BNP area, sometimes opt for such ways of resolving conflicts.

“We rarely apply such severe cultural approaches to resolve our conflicts. We decided to rapidly resort to it in this case because we saw it as a huge threat to our actions towards the management of natural resources within our cluster,” said Mr. Nkide Boniface Nkwelle, Adviser of the South East Cluster Platform from Nzimbeng village.

Cluster Platforms are a coalition of VFMCs in a defined area, characterized by villages with similar socio-cultural identity, and also stand as intermediaries between the protected area service and the VFMCs that make up the Cluster Platform.

One of their key roles is to advocate for change and negotiate for the rights of their cluster communities to actively participate in, and also benefit from, the sustainable management of natural resources in a protected area, including holding the duty-bearers accountable, particularly at local level, for their livelihood improvement, within the framework of collaborative management.

Three things, pertaining to the human rights-based approach on conservation, stand out clear in this community intervention.

Firstly, through this initiative, communities are seen taking lead in solving their conservation and development issues. Secondly, it shows the significance of local knowledge of the environment and the importance of giving and incorporating traditional and cultural practices of local community, who are the rights holders, into responding to conservation and development issues, and lastly, it shows how communities are attaching a lot of importance on their conservation and development endeavours.



WWF-CFP news reel...

Making your mark with Innovative Solutions

With the support of WWF Cameroon, the PTA of Ecole Publique de Nsoun is inviting the students, teachers and parents of the ESD schools in the Bakossi Landscape to search their minds and come out with models, inventions and innovations to address environmental challenges facing the world today.

Handsome prizes await the ten best inventors and innovators. Award ceremony will take place on a date to be announced in December 2021, but those interested in the competition should indicate their interest by registering with the ESD Teacher Coordinator at their ESD schools latest March 31.

Be part of the solution!

Leading the Change (LtC) Project is concluding it's work plan for the 2021-2022 phase of the project.

The Programme for the Sustainable Management of Natural Resources – South West Region steering committee was held and presided by the Minister of Forest and wildlife. WWF actively participated in the meeting.



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