



Global
Landscapes
Forum

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Women gaining ground through reforestation on the Cameroonian coast

Background

Along Cameroon's equatorial coast, women are planting trees on degraded land, both in the humid terrestrial ecosystems, and the estuarine areas where mangroves grow. In some cases, they're also gaining greater tenure security in the process.

Trees are felled for timber and firewood – usually by men. But forests provide much more than wood for the people who live in and around them. Intact mangroves sustain healthy fisheries, and coastal forests provide a sustainable source of non-timber forest products (NTFP) such as fruit and nuts.

Traditionally, these resources are hunted and gathered by women, to feed their families and trade for cash to pay for things like schoolbooks and medicines to advance their children's health and education. So reforestation makes sense for women in these communities, says Cécile Ndjebet of the African Women's Network for the Community Management of Forests (REFACOF).

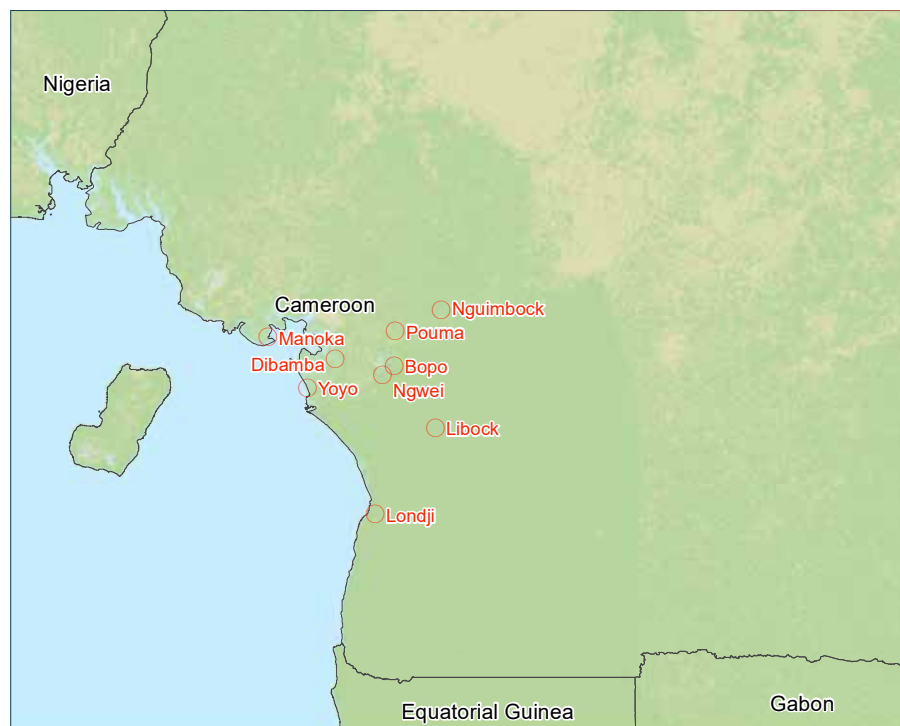


Figure 1. REFACOF reforestation sites in Cameroon.

However, in rural Cameroon, traditional patriarchal culture dictates that women can't own land, says Ndjebet. Married women can access land through their husbands in order to grow food and gather NTFP, explains Iris Flore Ngo Nken of Cameroon Ecology. But if their husband dies, that land will go to a male relative rather than his wife.

Women are often still motivated to plant trees, says Ndjebet, because it provides food security for the family in the near future, and will likely serve their male children further down the line. But greater tenure security would make a big difference for their own wellbeing, as well as that of their family. As such, REFACOF has worked with a number of groups to help make this happen.

Taking action

In 2011-12, REFACOF supported the reforestation of degraded areas in three coastal community forests: Bopo, Libock and Nguimbock. Nurseries were established, and 68,000 trees planted over three years, with a 70% success rate; according to Ndjebet, a lack of resources tends to prevent the women from monitoring the trees intensively until maturity, which would likely bring the success rate higher.

Then, in 2014, they worked with eight women from the Coopérative des Pêcheurs de Londji (COOPEL, the Cooperative of Fisherpeople in Londji village) to

restore three hectares of degraded mangrove forest, over a period of 6 months. There, the success rate was around 80%.

Later, in 2017, as part of a wider project on women's leadership in sustainable forest and farm management, women were supported to plant orchards in the coastal forest villages of Sanaga, Dibamba, Ngwei and Pouma. Through this project, seven hectares were planted over three months; the survival rate was 65% in this case, given it was the end of the rainy season and the beginning of a period of drought.



Photo 1. Women's tree nursery at Londji village.

Challenges and success

Women's contested right to plant trees presents both the biggest challenge and the greatest opportunity for this project. So REFACOF knew that they had to be strategic. "We realised that to change things for women, we needed to work with the men, because they have so much power," says Ndjebet.

That's why they began working with chiefs and husbands in the coastal forest communities, persuading them to let women plant trees on degraded land, which is less valuable to the men since it does not yield high-value timber.

"We say to them, "this will help with [mitigating the impacts of] climate change, and it will help your wife to feed you and your children,"" describes Ndjebet. "We share good practices and some good stories, and we show them the added value for their family's wellbeing," she says.

"Men generally recognize the great role women play in improving the families' living standards," says Ndjebet, "but it is important for them to also agree that for the women to continue to play that role and even improve in that role, they need security to lands and forests."

Usually, when the case is made in this way, men are "very happy" to comply, she says. Then, once they are permitted to plant trees, women can make use of the cultural construct whereby if someone plants trees on a piece of land it is considered a claim of ownership. "So even if her husband dies, if a woman's trees are there

then it will be understood as her claim on the land," says Ndjebet. "Then she cannot lose it. Because it shows the community that her husband has given her the authority to plant trees on that piece of land."

In the mangrove forests, the issue of tenure is not so easy to address, since there is no clear legal or regulatory framework governing these areas. But restoring mangroves remains crucial for women, in order to restore the fisheries on which they rely. "They have realised that the fish are disappearing with the mangroves," says Ndjebet. "And fish is so important for them. Not only for food security, but for income generation. So if they get the fish back, they will improve their economic situation."

So women have taken ownership of mangrove reforestation in the area, says Ngo Nken. Armed with new knowledge, resources and equipment, and upskilled in mangrove reforestation techniques, they are already restoring considerable areas where the trees have been felled.

However, according to the women involved, it's not all smooth sailing, says Ngo Nken. Planting mangroves in tidal areas requires intensive monitoring and specialist equipment, and these women have both limited financial resources and plenty of other demands on their time. Further, without secure tenure or reliable protection for the forests, it's difficult to trust that their considerable efforts will be worthwhile, and won't be squandered by opportunistic harvesters.

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– Cécile Ndjebet

African Women's Network for the Community Management of Forests (REFACOF)

Next steps

Appropriately, REFACOF is working with these women to secure legal status for the mangrove areas as “community forests”, and elaborate clear frameworks for their management. The projects listed so far are pilots, says Ndjebet, and REFACOF hopes to learn from them and bring them to scale in the coming years.

Already, it’s clear that at the national level, policy change is required to explicitly state that both men AND women can own land, she says. Alongside that, it’s important to keep challenging the customary practices of male-only inheritance. “In our work with traditional chiefs and

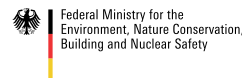
husbands,” she says, “it’s also to urge them: “Please, start bequeathing land to your daughters! Don’t only give it to your sons!””

Old patterns run deep, and change can be slow, because “people have been trained in doing things this way for centuries,” says Ndjebet. “But we need to make progress with each generation, and work so that in our grandchildren’s generation, things will be different.”

“We can turn the situation around.”

Story was developed by Esther Mwangi (CIFOR) and Monica Evans
Photos by REFACOF

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