Land acquisition and rights; Natural resource management

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Strengthening Indigenous land rights in Cameroon

Recognising Indigenous territories as ‘chieftaincies’ could be an interim solution ahead of law reform

Between 2017 and 2022, LandCam explored creative strategies to enable Indigenous communities in rural areas of Cameroon to exercise their rights to their historical and legitimate territories. The project worked with key stakeholders across Cameroon to improve land and resource governance by formulating evidence-based proposals for legal reform and by supporting citizens participate in the reform process.

Cameroon’s current legal framework denies the rights of Indigenous peoples, including fundamental rights such as over land and natural resources, and the rights to a territory and to exercise their cultural traditions and customs. This failure puts the survival of these peoples at risk. Many have been displaced by force or had their territories reduced by large-scale investments and now live on the customary lands claimed by Bantu communities in recognised chieftaincies.

LandCam focused on defending the rights of marginalised social groups such as Indigenous Peoples and provided recommendations for land law reform in Cameroon based on research, dialogue, mobilisation and advocacy. It involved extensive engagement with land rightsholders, government, traditional authorities, the private sector, media and the public. LandCam was carried out by the Centre for Environment and Development (CED) and the Network for the Fight Against Hunger in Cameroon (RELUFA) with technical support from IIED.

Key elements of the approach were: understanding intracommunity dynamics, supporting participatory mapping to define Baka territories, supporting dialogue with and between Bantu communities, and engaging with administrative bodies at local, departmental, regional and national levels. It was also important to collectively define the criteria for selecting who should act as chief and represent the community. This was an opportunity for each community to reflect on what ‘legitimacy to represent’ meant and improve how they organise.

Protecting cultural identity

Without legal protections for their territories, the foundations of Indigenous Peoples’ cultural identity are disappearing. In 2019, it was reported that the language of the Bedzang is quickly disappearing and that other forest Indigenous groups in Cameroon are at risk of losing their languages and associated cultural features. Creating Indigenous traditional chieftaincies will support recognition for and strengthen their political, legal, economic, social and cultural institutions, which are intertwined with their lands.

Participation in decision making

There is almost no representation of Indigenous Peoples in decision-making structures at local, regional or national
levels in Cameroon. Administrative bodies are composed of representatives from 'official', and mainly Bantu, chieftaincies. However, if Indigenous communities’ territories are recognised as administrative units, this would improve their representation and participation in decision-making bodies where chiefs have a guaranteed seat. It would also improve access to official information.

**What challenges remain?**
Creating new Indigenous chieftaincies will require transferring some lands and customary use rights from existing Bantu chieftaincies, reducing those territories. Negotiations with these chiefs are often difficult. However, if negotiations are successful, the process becomes a standard — and less fraught — administrative procedure.

**Next steps**
CED, RELUFA and other partners will continue to strengthen Indigenous land rights and facilitate local-level solutions and dialogue for greater land rights clarity and protection. This is part of a larger movement to recognise Indigenous Peoples’ legitimate tenure rights. By documenting and sharing evidence from this work, we aim to continue advocating for inclusive land law reform and supporting Indigenous and other marginalised communities to claim their rights to land, vital resources, livelihoods and culturally-appropriate governance.

Given the threats to the identity, culture, and territories of Indigenous Peoples worldwide, a similar approach could be scaled up effectively elsewhere. In countries where there is no concept of traditional chieftaincies, practitioners and rights defenders could identify what types of administrative unit Indigenous communities might use to create legally recognised territories that can integrate into existing governance structures.

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**KEY LESSONS LEARNT & INNOVATIONS**

- With few legal protections for Indigenous land rights in Cameroon and growing pressures on their territories, creating Indigenous traditional chieftaincies under administrative law provides an interim solution to safeguard Indigenous rights to land and resources. This approach should be incorporated into land law reforms.
- CED’s pilots show that the creation of chieftaincies will be relatively easy to implement once agreements are reached with other dominant landholding communities (Bantu). These experiences show that this can require significant dialogue, and that the state (from local to national) must be involved to ensure new Indigenous chieftaincies are legally recognised.
- This approach can be adapted to other contexts. In countries where traditional chieftaincies may not exist, this would mean selecting the administrative unit most suitable for integrating Indigenous territorial recognition into existing governance structures.

**PARTNERS’ VIEW**

The delimitation of a territory for Indigenous Peoples and its recognition as a traditional chieftaincy is the best way to guarantee them intergenerational access to the land and resources on which their material and cultural survival depends. This approach also ensures the good cohabitation with other local communities by finally formalising their presence over a given area.

His Majesty Mvondo, traditional chief and president of the RECTRAD

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