

### Keywords:

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## OVERVIEW

### IIED Natural Resources Group

#### Project name:

LandCam: securing land and resource rights and improving governance in Cameroon

#### Project leader:

Amaelle Seigneret

#### Time frame:

February 2017–January 2023

#### Budget:

EUR 4,507,985

#### Objective:

Cameroon is reforming its land and natural resource laws. As commercial pressures on land and resources grow and a dated legal framework fails to protect community rights, LandCam supports the reform process by piloting approaches to improve resource governance in rural areas and by helping citizens take part.

This publication stems from the work of Michelle Sonkoue and Romuald Ngono, both natural resources governance and Indigenous rights experts.

## PROJECT SUMMARY

LandCam aimed to defend the rights of marginalised groups, such as Indigenous Peoples; it has made recommendations for land law reform in Cameroon based on research, dialogue, mobilisation and advocacy in rural regions. This involved extensive engagement with rightsholders, government, traditional authorities, the private sector, media and the broader public. LandCam was carried out by the Centre for Environment and Development (CED) and the Network for the Fight Against Hunger in Cameroon (RELUF), with technical support from IIED.

## CHANGE IN ACTION

LandCam recognises legal empowerment as a process led by those whose rights are at stake and that collective action allows marginalised groups to become change-making protagonists. In 2018–2019, as part of the LandCam project, CED supported a multistakeholder dialogue in the Dja Biosphere Reserve to address a

# Using dialogue to address land-related conflicts

## Support for collective action in Cameroon helps communities better voice their needs

In Cameroon, the rise in large-scale investments in sectors such as agribusiness, mining and forestry has caused widespread transfers of land rights from local communities to commercial actors. But these transfers often overlook community rights to consultation, information and consent. Investments cause frequent displacement and/or loss of access to crucial areas and resources. They are often sources of conflict, especially when they ignore local priorities or fail to generate substantial benefits.

Here, we reflect on key learnings from LandCam's work to support communities affected by an agribusiness plantation in the Dja Biosphere Reserve, a protected area in Southern Cameroon. Since the concession was granted in 2008, the plantation has encroached on land used by local communities, causing severe social and environmental impacts. The resulting community–investor conflict has led to tensions within and between broader groups of actors, including the affected communities, traditional authorities, local and regional authorities, and conservation actors.

### Why set up a dialogue?

In the Dja reserve, the affected communities were not able to express grievances via the Land Consultative Board (the government body that greenlit this large-scale land acquisition). There was no other institutional mechanism to give them this opportunity, leading to

community fatigue and weaker cohesion. Establishing an inclusive multistakeholder dialogue was an important step towards providing an effective space for communities to raise their concerns and demands. CED provided the communities with legal and technical support to participate in the process, using a rights-based approach to ensure that the communities could engage meaningfully.

An effective and inclusive multistakeholder dialogue should:

- **Be context-sensitive and context-situated:** organisations supporting and monitoring the dialogue should map all stakeholders (particularly at intra-community level) as well as the investment chain to identify all actors linked to the investment and their obligations.
- **Assess power relations:** to understand different interests and imbalances in capacity and influence, and to help affected communities be empowered to organise for and participate in negotiations (for example by providing independent legal support). Special emphasis was given to marginalised groups within communities, such as women and Indigenous Peoples, and their specific needs.
- **Agree mechanisms for consensus or compromise:** all parties should agree on the design and terms of the dialogue, which must fit the schedule, cultures and languages of the affected communities.

land-related conflict between Indigenous Peoples and local communities and a large-scale agribusiness investor. The Dja dialogue brought together the investor, affected communities, conservation actors, local government representatives and other civil society organisations. The objective was to find solutions to enable the communities with legitimate claims to the land to maintain their livelihoods sustainably and have secure access to resources, while also meeting conservation objectives. CED and local partners aimed to support community members by providing legal and technical assistance including legal literacy, strategy and organisation, negotiation and representation, and leadership training for marginalised groups such as Indigenous Peoples and women. The dialogue improved understanding of differences in perception between the investors and communities, and enabled the latter to better formulate their demands.

## KEY LESSONS LEARNT & INNOVATIONS

Dialogues can help address major power imbalances in investor–community relationships, and prevent and manage land-related conflicts. But to be scaled up effectively, land laws and investment procedures must make inclusive dialogue frameworks a legal obligation, using robust criteria for community consultation, consent and benefit sharing. Bringing together multiple stakeholders can help address land-related issues by taking a more coordinated and integrated approach between different sectors, such as conservation and development. But dialogues must also balance competing interests and objectives, so that effective compromises can be made while protecting marginalised peoples' rights. Strong community mobilisation and collective organisation is essential if communities are to engage meaningfully in dialogues. It takes substantial time and effort to ensure that communities — especially vulnerable members — receive adequate independent support.

## PARTNERS' VIEW

“The dialogue framework is a response to key needs of communities living near land-based projects, who often face a lack of information and space to express themselves on resource management. It is important to designate legitimate and well-equipped representatives to defend collective interests and ensure the transparency of the decisions taken.”

Martin Biyong, Director of CEDLA

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Small-scale farming in Cameroon.

- **Be independently facilitated and monitored:** to avoid biases in favour of more powerful parties and ensure accountability in enforcing decisions.

The setup of the dialogue improved communication and collaboration between stakeholders, and led to two important changes: the American parent company adopted a ‘zero deforestation’ policy (applicable to operations worldwide) and the operating company halted deforestation within the concession on unplanted areas.

## Challenges and lessons learnt

Despite positive progress, CED's community-support team noted some challenges. The lessons below will be important in advancing community–investor dialogues.

**Managing competing interests and compromise.** The dialogue brought together actors from different sectors, many of whom had competing or conflicting objectives and approaches. Coordination among all the stakeholders, let alone within civil society actors, was difficult. The dialogue would have been more impactful had these competing interests been more clearly mapped from the outset to anticipate areas of potential disagreement. This is essential for creating the right conditions so that even if consensus cannot be achieved, compromises can be agreed.

**Tackling power imbalances.** Power imbalances were observed between actors at all levels taking part in the dialogue, including within and between communities. Those with greater education or influence often tried to sway outcomes in their favour. This can have a discouraging effect on communities and highlights the crucial importance of bringing in independent legal support for communities and a neutral facilitator to oversee the dialogue process.

**Improving community mobilisation.** Another key lesson that emerged was the

importance of strengthening intra-community organisation and mobilisation. Without that, the potential impact of a dialogue is limited.

Communities need to be prepared well in advance to be able to assess, agree and define their diverse needs and demands. More sustained and informed internal discussions could have resulted in more solid proposals, with communities speaking with one voice.

## What next?

The Dja dialogue was part of a wider ongoing programme of research and advocacy activities to improve land and investment governance. CED will keep working with chiefs and trained community representatives to foster greater internal discussion and organisation so that communities are better prepared and empowered to become protagonists for change.

However, most investors have little or no incentive to participate in dialogues that may mean making compromises in a community's favour. Successful initiatives like the Dja dialogue will remain isolated and hard to scale up unless community–investor dialogues are systemised in law. CED and partners will continue to advocate for law reforms, such as improved legal frameworks for investment procedures that have robust criteria for consultation, consent and benefit sharing.



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