



LandCam: lessons from six years of linking action, research and advocacy to support land reform

Amaelle Seigneret (ed.), Samuel Nguiffo, Lorenzo Cotula, Jaff Bamenjo, Sandrine Kouba, Guy Lebrun Ambomo, Flora Lamero Zok, Stella Tchoukep and Jérémy Davis

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Cover photo: Montage from interviews conducted by the LandCam communications team during Land Week 2022.

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Abbreviations

| | |
|----------------------|---|
| CED | Centre for Environment and Development |
| CSO | Civil society organisation |
| FAO | Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations |
| Voluntary Guidelines | Voluntary Guidelines for Responsible Governance of Tenure of Land, Fisheries and Forests in the Context of National Food Security |
| IIED | International Institute for Environment and Development |
| ILC | International Land Coalition |
| MINDCAF | Ministry of State Property, Surveys and Land Tenure |
| NES | National Engagement Strategy |
| NGO | Nongovernmental organisation |
| RECTRAD | Network of Traditional Rulers for the Conservation of Biodiversity and Sustainable Management of the Congo Basin Ecosystems |
| RELUFA | Network for the Fight against Hunger |
| REPAR | Network of Parliamentarians for the Sustainable Management of Forest Ecosystems in Central Africa |
| UNESCO | United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization |

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Summary

The LandCam project was implemented by the Centre for Environment and Development (CED), the Network for the Fight against Hunger (RELUFA) and the International Institute for Environment and Development (IIED), to support the fair and inclusive reform of land governance in Cameroon at local and national levels. It sought to address historical gaps in citizen participation in policy processes and encourage inclusive dialogue between government and civil society. The project adopted an innovative approach in the Cameroonian context that used a combination of research, mobilisation and policy advocacy to address the country's complex land governance issues.

The first section of this report sets the scene for the project approach, which was developed to address the specific situation in Cameroon. It describes the complex land issues in the country, highlights the challenges that people face in securing land and land rights, and identifies major problems that require urgent action, such as land-related conflicts, land grabbing and gaps in existing land legislation.

The report emphasises the important role that LandCam's participatory approach has played in helping address these challenges. The project sought to promote inclusive, sustainable land governance by recognising the diverse land tenure systems in Cameroon and actively involving a wide range of stakeholders, from local communities and civil society actors to government and international partners. This collaborative approach was regarded as vital in ensuring that the land tenure reform would be legitimate, widely accepted, and respond effectively to local people's needs and concerns.

The section on project activities at the local level shows how bottom-up mobilisation was central to better understanding and addressing land-related challenges in Cameroon. LandCam recognised the importance of considering local dynamics and the specific needs of diverse communities in order to formulate appropriate recommendations, and aimed to enable communities to actively engage in decision-making processes and defend their land rights themselves. This entailed training members of affected communities on their rights, raising awareness of legal and administrative procedures, and strengthening local organisations. The project also gathered key data on local land governance realities and needs, which provided solid evidence for policy recommendations and advocacy on appropriate legislative and policy reforms.

Considerable effort was invested in mobilising different stakeholder groups and encouraging them to address land-related challenges in Cameroon in a holistic and inclusive manner. Recognising that resolving land issues requires collaboration between diverse stakeholders, LandCam established strategic partnerships with a wide range of actors (government representatives, civil society, local communities,

international organisations, donors, etc), and sought to create an environment conducive to dialogue and the formulation of effective and sustainable policy solutions.

These initiatives aimed to foster mutual understanding between stakeholders, and enable them to identify points of convergence, overcome their differences and forge a consensus on land issues. Engaging different protagonists in a process of constructive dialogue allowed LandCam to create synergies, maximise the impact of its interventions and facilitate the emergence of paths to more equitable and transparent land governance.

On a more general level, LandCam used research publications, analytical reports, targeted media interventions around current events, multi-stakeholder dialogues and training programmes to raise awareness of land issues and increase support for progressive policy reforms among many key actors, including students, journalists and private sector companies.

This report also shows the importance of working at the policy level in order to influence land reforms. Cameroon is a country where civil society was historically excluded from the policy arena, and laws were not drafted in an inclusive or participatory manner. One of the project's notable successes was its active engagement with policymakers and government institutions. Building strategic partnerships with key actors such as the Ministry of State Property, Surveys and Land Tenure enabled LandCam to influence national land policy debates and cultivate acceptance of more inclusive land governance regimes. It also established successful events such as 'Land Tenure Weeks' and Government–Parliament Dialogues, thereby creating sustainable spaces for discussion and deliberation where civil society actors can make their views and voices heard.

In doing this, the project contributed to significant progress in improving the government's understanding of land issues. Government bodies have changed their position on certain issues, such as recognising the need to protect customary land rights and village lands, and now take greater account of the precariousness of Indigenous Peoples' and women's land rights. Thanks to its sustained efforts and work building trust with different stakeholders, LandCam succeeded in positioning itself as a key reference point on land issues in Cameroon and gained the legitimacy and credibility required to influence decision makers.

The report ends by looking at the lessons learned from the LandCam project and possible future directions for the land reform in Cameroon. Although the adoption of this reform depends on political circumstances that are beyond the project's control, the work it did fundamentally changed the national landscape for collective thinking on the reform, by establishing a platform for empirical data, formulating constructive and feasible proposals, developing effective mechanisms for collaboration and dialogue at the national level, and building trust between all the protagonists concerned. These achievements will play a key role in taking the reform forward and creating the political space for its adoption.

The forums for dialogue and coordination created by LandCam will need continued support to sustain the progress made thus far and maintain the momentum generated by the project. Civil society will need to remain vigilant and actively monitor implementation of the reform and participation in decision-making processes. It is also essential to ensure effective coordination between donors and those involved in the reform, in order to avoid fragmentary and contradictory development policies and initiatives. Finally, it is important to invest in training and capacity building for everyone involved in land governance, to ensure that they have a thorough understanding of the issues and best practices in this field.

Introduction

Insecure land tenure is an ongoing challenge in many African countries. In recent years it has been exacerbated by waves of large-scale investments in natural resources and environmental conservation projects that take up huge tracts of land (Cotula, 2013). Commercial interest in international markets continues to grow along with high demand for large amounts of land for agribusiness, infrastructure projects and extractive industries (Borras Jr and Franco, 2024). These projects create numerous social problems, are often responsible for severe human rights violations and are frequently detrimental to local populations (RRI, 2017). The land they occupy is often acquired without the consent of its legitimate occupants, and with very little prior consultation and insufficient or inadequate compensation.

This situation has led to the increasing uptake of policy and legislative reform programmes to promote good land governance, whether initiated by development aid or national strategies. Their objective is often to secure the customary land rights of rural populations, as local people are frequently marginalised by decision-making structures, have little means of defending themselves, and are generally the most deeply affected by new large-scale land uses that restrict their day-to-day activities.

The LandCam project conducted a wide range of research, action and advocacy activities on land issues in Cameroon between 2017 and 2023. It was led by two Cameroonian nongovernmental organisations (NGOs), the Centre for Environment and Development (CED) and the Network for the Fight against Hunger (RELUFa), which partnered up with the International Institute for Environment and Development (IIED). The aim of the project was to develop appropriate solutions to land-related challenges, with a focus on securing rights and improving land governance in rural areas. It was undertaken in the context of a national land reform that had been announced by the Cameroonian government in 2011, paving the way for action on land governance but also raising major concerns about protections for rural Cameroonians' land rights.

We felt that a successful reform should deliver a land law that reflects the interests and expectations of the people it will most affect: rural communities, who are the country's primary land users and whose quality of life and ability to exercise their most basic human rights are directly impacted by legislation on land and resource management. The aim was therefore to provide the framework for a truly legitimate legal reform process.

The LandCam project provides practical lessons on how to navigate the landscape of a reform process, which inevitably involves conflicting and sometimes irreconcilable positions and interests, imbalances of power and unequal access to decision-making forums. Although the reform had yet to be completed in January

2024, LandCam helped move the debate forward by drawing attention to crucial aspects of the content and process of the reform, providing food for thought based on practical observations, and creating spaces where stakeholders who had previously spoken out separately on land issues can come together. This was made possible by the project's holistic and contextualised approach, which is reviewed in this report. We hope that the key elements and insights described here will be useful for actors who are interested in creating spaces for inclusive deliberation and building consensus and legitimate action on governance issues.

1. Background to the LandCam approach

Interventions in a reform process should be based on a clear and detailed understanding of the context so that relevant, targeted strategies can be formulated. This section discusses the approach adopted for the diagnostic stage of the project and development of its intervention strategies.

1.1 The national context in Cameroon

The last major land law reform in Cameroon dates back to a series of land tenure ordinances that were promulgated in 1974 and followed by implementing decrees in 1976. The country's population at the time was a third of its current size, and there were relatively few investments that affected land tenure. Spatial planning was not seen as a policy priority, and land conflicts between external actors and local communities were rare.

The land tenure system that was introduced in the 1970s does not recognise customary land tenure regimes, despite their continued existence alongside the formal system. Land ownership is formalised through individual titles, which can only be obtained if there is visible evidence of productive land use ('development'). This requirement automatically excludes a large proportion of rural land users, such as hunter-gatherers and (semi-) nomadic or transhumant groups; while farmers who meet this condition have to follow complex, lengthy and costly registration procedures. As a result, titling rates are very low and tenure insecurity is very high: a large proportion of rural Cameroonians' land rights are not formalised, and are therefore neither recognised nor protected under the current legal framework. In this context, the system is quite simply not fit for purpose as it can neither respond adequately to the pressures on rural land, nor effectively protect people's land rights.

Recent decades have seen an increase in requests for land concessions and land allocations for agribusiness and other initiatives that exploit natural resources (major infrastructure projects, logging operations, new protected areas, etc) (Yang and He, 2021), which have created tensions and conflicts between historical or legitimate users and new arrivals. The procedures for awarding concessions are often highly flawed and extremely opaque, and many contravene so-called 'good practices' such as inclusive consultation and obtaining the free, informed and prior consent of the people concerned, generate no real benefits for affected communities, and hijack the concept of 'public utility' for their own ends.

In addition to this, Cameroon's legislation on land and natural resources is fragmented and incoherent. The land management provisions of sectoral laws on natural resources (mining, forestry, oil, etc.) are not always consistent with those

of land legislation, and different sectors may consider and prioritise land issues in different ways that do not always reflect an activity's impact on land and local rights. There are also major inconsistencies in the regimes for land, forests, livestock, rural development, water and mining, among others, due to a glaring lack of cross-sectoral dialogue and coordination.

The proper implementation of such legislation — with all its limitations, including the fact that some regulations are outdated — is also hampered by institutional issues, such as unclear or undischarged responsibilities at different administrative levels, and/or services that are too far removed from users due to an incomplete decentralisation process.

The major challenge for Cameroon is therefore ensuring that land and natural resources are governed appropriately, in ways that take account of the diverse actors who share them and the growing pressures on these resources.

1.2 Assessing the obstacles, actors, inequalities and prevailing discourses

When the reform of the legal framework for land was announced in 2011, opinions differed as to how it should be conducted, given the divergent objectives and interests involved, stakeholders' asymmetrical knowledge and understanding of the issues, and the virtual absence of cross-sectoral dialogue. All these factors were likely to affect the progress of the reform, the inclusiveness of the process, and its content and subsequent implementation. In order to find a place in this arena and contribute effectively to the reform process, the project needed to develop a refined, strategic understanding of the dynamics, actors, interests and historical and contemporary issues that influence perceptions of land issues in public spaces and decision-making circles.

A turning point in the approach to the reform

Land reforms are inherently context-specific. Until ten years ago, the policy landscape in Cameroon was generally rather hostile to the participatory formulation of laws and policies, favouring more 'traditional' approaches where draft laws are mainly developed by 'technical experts', with little consultation. In this case, the government decided to break with tradition and open up the land reform process to nongovernmental actors. This marked a real turning point in the development of a policy project and provided an important opportunity for a genuinely innovative reform.

Nongovernmental actors had previously been given little space in the policy and legislative arena. National civil society organisations (including CED and RELUFA) had long warned of the social and environmental impacts of major land-based investments and highlighted various land governance issues across the country, but had little chance of making these observations and discussing their implications in

the policy arena because the government was reluctant to consult and engage with this group of actors.

When the government announced the land reform in 2011, it emphasised its desire to promote 'second-generation' agriculture, reflecting a vision based on industrial farming and foreign investment as vectors for economic development. As this would encourage large-scale investments and favour the financial interests of certain actors, particularly in the private sector, there were concerns about protections for rural land rights that had previously been largely ignored in land allocations for investment projects. One of the key issues in the reform was therefore defining the land rights that would be recognised under the new bill.

Legislative reforms are usually guided by a roadmap or public policy. But as no such document was developed in this case, the broad guiding principles underpinning the new law were not defined, and the vision for the reform was never formally articulated. Land issues are multi-faceted, meaning that different and sometimes conflicting views, ideologies and objectives would be in play. These different positions would affect the approaches that were considered and influence both the process and content of the reform: not only the transparency and inclusiveness of the debates, but also the quality and substance of proposals to resolve the potentially divisive issues that the reform needed to address.

A variety of inequalities

The actors affected by the land reform experience different kinds of inequality, which mainly relate to:

- **The status of their land rights:** how are practical and legal aspects of these rights reflected in the discourse around the reform, particularly those of Indigenous Peoples, women and migrants? People face different challenges depending on their financial resources, connections with powerful actors, legal knowledge, etc., which affect the types of land rights they may have and their ability to defend them.
- **Access to information and understanding of the issues at stake:** in a context of insecure rural land rights, people who are unfamiliar with current regulations and/or have limited means of defending their rights are marginalised and lose out to other, better-resourced actors. Greater legal insecurity makes further abuse and long-term land-grabbing cheap and easy for such actors.
- **Having a say in the reform process:** not all groups or individuals have equal access to a platform where they can formulate and articulate their demands. Access to public spaces and decision-makers may seem impossible for socially marginalised groups, who are generally the most disadvantaged when it comes to land decisions.

The need for more imaginative ideas to define a roadmap

Legislators often take the old law as their starting point for a reform and only change genuinely problematic articles, rather than starting again from scratch. This risks perpetuating existing problems and limits the potential for change. Even if they want bold reforms, legislators may hold back due to fear of their consequences and the risk of (further) conflict.

The main reason why the land reform is still a work in progress after over ten years is because its content has yet to be determined. While it could be useful to look at other countries that have been through similar processes, it is important to remember that each situation is different, and that what works elsewhere will not necessarily work in Cameroon. The progress of the reform was also hampered by a lack of knowledge about the changes and alternative approaches that other countries have used to address problems that exist in Cameroon, and a lack of imagination in devising new approaches to these issues.

A change of mindset was required so that the issues the reform needs to address could be thoroughly investigated and analysed outside the confines of rigid prevalent ideas. It is just as hard to set aside technocratic approaches based on international land management models inherited from colonial times as it is to return to purely customary approaches. This leaves legislators with little room for manoeuvre unless they are willing to explore other paths that consider the multiple realities in their country and use bottom-up processes to address them.

Building consensus in the face of seemingly irreconcilable ideological positions is a crucial but extremely complicated task. One of the challenges in this respect was the two longstanding but contradictory ideological concepts of 'land rights' in Cameroon. One, which chimed with Western ideas of private ownership, allowed investors to dispossess communities of their land; while the other reflected historical provisions for customary ownership that better protect local socio-economic and cultural interests. Cameroonian governments historically took the former position, even though it often does not reflect the customary land practices that uphold shared and community ownership. It was therefore essential to root the reform in these realities in order to enable those concerned to understand and endorse the new law.

Finally, the thinking behind proposals may also be constrained by other complex problems that seem unsolvable or likely to make the situation worse. The need to consider Indigenous Peoples' rights, resolve land conflicts and tackle increasing land scarcity and aridification, contributed to a widespread sense of powerlessness that paralysed and limited the ambition of the reform process.

1.3 LandCam's strategy

One of LandCam's key objectives was to contribute to a successful land reform, both in terms of process and outcome. This meant providing recommendations based on data that reflected local realities across the country and advocated for residents' needs, testing approaches that could be replicated on a large scale and integrated into the new governance model, mobilising and equipping different stakeholders to engage in the process, and developing strategic partnerships with them.

Land issues are intrinsically political. Land management and use reflect varied and sometimes incompatible interests, and embody societal power imbalances. *Who controls the land? Who uses it? How and to what end?* Understanding these issues is a vital step in a reform process as they will affect its course and content (Wily, 2011). It was also important to take account of official processes and procedures, and more hidden, unofficial dynamics.

The project needed to identify strategies and entry points so that it could build consensus around very sensitive, potentially taboo issues, and represent people who usually go unrepresented. To give the reform a better chance of leading to real change and reflecting the proposals presented by rights activists, we looked for 'political windows' or windows of opportunity that would give us an entry point into the process. A political window opens when three conditions align to create a new space for innovative ideas: i) a problem is identified, ii) solutions are proposed, and iii) there is a change in the political context (Kingdon, 1984). A fourth condition, which the Cameroonian government seemed to fulfil when it invited nongovernmental actors to put forward proposals, would be mobilising executive and legislative bodies.

LandCam's approach therefore aimed to understand *the country's political economy* in order to better comprehend all the parameters likely to directly and indirectly influence the reform process. This understanding would then provide the sound basis needed to develop research, action and advocacy strategies (Cotula and Berger, 2017).

2. Building legitimacy for an inclusive land reform

Using the approach presented above to analyse the context of the reform enabled the project to identify appropriate intervention areas, confirm that its actions were relevant, and ensure that the reform process and content were legitimate. One of the major challenges was getting the widest possible range of rural actors' voices heard at the national level. We developed a multi-level approach that combined research to understand the issues and develop coherent proposals with awareness-raising and support activities to develop stakeholders' capacity to act, mobilise communities affected by investments, and advocate on their behalf.

2.1 Local issues and grassroots mobilisation

We developed a range of local activities to document, inform and support actions by people and communities who are marginalised in land governance. The project focused on a few key areas across Cameroon with diverse land tenure processes whose socioeconomic implications reflected the main challenges that the reform needed to address (see Box 1).

This work at the local level consisted of research and mobilisation activities to develop advocacy at the national level, and actions to defend rights. The project's general approach was part of a legal empowerment strategy to support individuals who are generally marginalised and excluded from decision-making structures because of unequal power relations, and build their capacity to defend their interests (Cotula, 2022). The aim was to enable these people to actively engage in making informed choices and to implement strategies to change their situation – for example, by helping them obtain information about their rights, finding ways of strengthening or enforcing them, and identifying entry points and actors to mobilise.

This section presents the main lessons learned from LandCam's interventions at the local level, which combined 'action research' with legal empowerment.

Box 1. Geographical scope of the project

LandCam intervened in as wide a geographical area as possible in order to reflect the great diversity of sociocultural realities, ecological and climatic profiles, and land use and management methods while developing more in-depth areas of activity in so-called 'pilot sites'.

Each pilot site represented a geographical area with multiple forms of land use. This enabled us to gain a more holistic view of the many factors that contribute to land pressures in Cameroon, which include agro-industrial and forestry concessions, major infrastructure projects, biodiversity conservation, and family farming.

1. Océan department

Océan department is home to a large number of existing and prospective large-scale projects, which are increasingly encroaching on the land available to local people. Multiple major infrastructure projects, expanding agro-industrial plantations and logging and mining concerns (mainly in the exploration phase) coexist with environmental conservation initiatives. Frequent overlaps between different land uses have led to numerous conflicts, and serious concerns have been raised about some projects' expropriation and/or compensation procedures for affected people.

The traditional livelihoods and lifestyles of the indigenous Bagyeli communities that live in this area have been severely compromised by these growing pressures on land. Since the arrival of the Chad-Cameroon pipeline in the late 1990s, little account has been taken of their land use rights when concessions involving natural resources are awarded.

The construction of Kribi Deep Water Port and expansion of agro-industrial plantations and existing forestry concessions have also increased pressure on land and introduced a new dynamic into conflicts over land use. In recent years, Kribi has become the main entry port for Cameroon, Chad, the Central African Republic, northern Congo, Equatorial Guinea and Gabon. Its growing economic importance has led to land speculation and land grabbing by elites, further reducing the land available for local people.

2. The Dja reserve

The pilot site in Dja is in a protected area that is classified as a UNESCO World Heritage Site due to its remarkable biodiversity. The presence of agro-industrial, mining, forestry and major infrastructure projects and protected areas has caused a range of land-related issues in the site. The uncoordinated management of all these uses is adversely affecting local communities, hindering their ability to exercise their land rights and pursue their socioeconomic and cultural activities. It also threatens efforts to protect flora and fauna.

The Dja reserve is one of the oldest protected areas in Central Africa, and home to emblematic species such as great apes and other large mammals. One of the key governance issues in the reserve is ensuring that historical rights holders are able

to coexist with conservation initiatives, whose approaches tend to exclude local communities. The biodiversity of the site is also threatened by its proximity to a large number of investment projects with high environmental impacts, and a lack of alternative economic activities that has led to widespread poaching.

3. The North and Far North regions of Cameroon

The Waza Logone floodplain in Far North region is one of the most important multifunctional basins in the Sahel because of its multiple socioeconomic uses (grazing, fishing, hunting, flooded rice cultivation, etc). Each of these activities is subject to rules governing land access and use, and involves specific stakeholders with particular interests.

These areas are now occupied by large-scale hydro-agricultural developments, which often proceed without consulting members of the communities that used to farm the land, threaten the economic and food security of small-scale fishers, farmers and herders, and are the source of numerous conflicts.

It should be noted that during the course of the project, the security situation in the English-speaking area and part of northern Cameroon made it difficult, if not impossible to operate in several areas. Although LandCam was unable to conduct activities there, it did mobilise local actors in order take account of their views and ensure that they were representative.

(Adapted from the methodological note prepared at the start of the project.)

Understanding the multiple realities of unrepresented actors

Certain social groups have historically not been represented in land governance decisions and matters, such as (semi-) nomadic and transhumant groups, Indigenous Peoples, women, young people, and internally displaced persons and refugees. These groups have precarious rights that are not recognised legally or in practice, and their ability to access and use land is often further undermined by external factors. The project wanted to hear and understand their views so that it could support and enable them to organise and play an active role in the reform process.

There are many preconceived ideas about the obstacles that these groups face, which are often considered in a homogenous way with little or no regard for the diversity of situations and individuals concerned. Against this, the project took an as-situated-as-possible approach, using action research to show the diverse situations and multiple realities that 'women' or 'Indigenous Peoples' may experience. LandCam's research activities with many hitherto unrepresented individuals and communities generated rich new knowledge that better reflects their perspectives.

It emerged that their realities are influenced by both the structural factors that shape their environment (investment projects, administrative decisions on land use, etc) and their personal situations; and that a cross-cutting, systemic approach was therefore needed to take account of the interaction between class, gender and other dynamics. The project published several detailed guides to this approach, highlighting the need for nuanced discussions when talking about women's land rights for example, as well as about other issues.

Our actions were designed to provide a better understanding of the land management methods and forms of internal organisation that exist across the country, the issues, challenges and threats identified by residents and land users in the project sites, and to involve those directly concerned in articulating these problems and finding potential solutions to them.

Contextualising and refocusing debates at the local level

Communities do not always have a full or accurate understanding of the challenges they face. This can lead to misunderstandings or to problems being poorly framed and addressed. A common example of this is the belief that individual titles are the best way of securing land in the long term, despite the many limitations of this procedure (Wily, 2011). A widespread lack of transparency also often results in partial or inaccurate representations of who is responsible for decisions that affect people's rights when their land is allocated. The project therefore needed to provide some contextual information to help guide local discussions and formulate appropriate recommendations for the reform that would be supported by the land users concerned.

These discussions and our research activities also enabled us to better define major problems. For example, gender issues were often framed in terms of women's access to land, but closer investigation of the dynamics around land access showed that it has many dimensions, such as the security and sustainability of access, the quality and location of land, the nature and use of economic benefits, and representation and participation in decision-making. This nuanced focus on implications at the local level shows that access is a cross-cutting issue that intersects with many other aspects of land matters, and that it cannot be considered in isolation (Sutz, 2021). Taking this into account led to more appropriate recommendations for the reform.

Overall, there are a large number of problems that cannot be easily resolved. Some can clearly be described as urgent and are a major concern for the general public – such as securing land rights, the land registration system, compensation procedures, the creation of a single national land register, and the role that local institutions play in land governance. Other problems are less obvious. Identifying them takes time, as does thinking through numerous scenarios and considering the repercussions of potential solutions. For example, what can be done when no-one has come forward to claim their rights to a piece of land after a long time?

These local investigations were an opportunity to identify key stakeholders and discuss important issues and desirable solutions with them. This provided a better overview of many existing and anticipated situations, and broadened the scope of the issues that the reform needs to consider and address.

This work also informed our thinking about how to support actions to defend rights, by helping people better understand their rights and adopt appropriate strategies for their situation.

Suggesting appropriate tools and levers for action

As part of its legal empowerment approach, one of LandCam's key objectives was to provide people who face social and/or environmental injustice with the legal knowledge and tools they need to defend their interests.

In a reform context, where by definition the law is bound to change, and where more generally laws often foster discrimination and marginalisation, the project had to decide what its information and awareness campaigns should cover and identify the most appropriate entry points for these activities. In this particular context, they could be Cameroon's international commitments, corporate obligations, or presentations on comparative approaches (such as community-business dialogue) to give local people more concrete examples of what is happening elsewhere and what is likely to work for them. Project interventions in areas affected by investments were adapted to incorporate this technical content and present it in a clear and accessible way.

The project's strategies varied according to the situation and the needs expressed by the individuals and communities it interacted with. In addition to in-person training and awareness-raising sessions, the team used various combinations of tools to address real problems. These included:

- **Predictive tools to anticipate conflicts.** A particularly good example of this is participatory mapping, which lists the many ways in which members of a village occupy and use their territory, sets out communities' rights, and identifies where they encounter problems. This is particularly important in contexts where there is no central land register, and where this data is not documented – which may even be the case within a community. This approach has been proposed on numerous occasions where conflicts have arisen, and used to provide concrete examples of points of tension with investors or other newcomers to an area, by demonstrating the impacts that their actions have on people with a historical attachment to the land in question.
- **Channels of communication and people who can be contacted in times of need (rapid response mechanism).** Communities were asked to report violations and abuses, and an early warning system was set up to give the LandCam team rapid feedback on developments and problems in the field. This tool was particularly useful for keeping in touch during the COVID-19 period,

when field visits were restricted and major investment projects instrumentalised 'social distancing' measures as a cover for their lack of transparency.

- **Various customised ways of circulating information.** Limited human, time and financial resources made it impossible to directly engage with everyone who is experiencing or is likely to experience land pressures in a particular area. LandCam used a variety of communication channels to overcome this problem. In the Océan area, it developed a radio programme in partnership with local radio station Nkuli Makeli, which produced informative programmes on various land-related topics in the local language to ensure that the content was accessible to listeners. The project also developed infographics and materials for distribution in the sites it visited.
- **Creating spaces to engage in dialogue with other actors and try to resolve problems.** The tools described above helped mobilise community members and gave them a starting point to cultivate or create spaces where they could present their demands. 'Dialogue platforms' are often used to bring the protagonists in a conflict together and enable representatives of affected communities to share their observations and demands. LandCam promoted and tested this tool on several occasions, working with government and corporate actors who generally respond to external expectations (market, donors) rather than the views of surrounding communities. Having provided the opportunity to bring both sides to the table, it was essential to provide proper preparation and support, and follow up on the decisions and commitments made in that space.
- **Guidance and support on possible responses and means of dealing with the problems observed.** When it was relevant and possible, the project for example supported activities that contributed to legal action, such as guiding discussions so that abuses could be brought to light, and collecting testimonies to support a complaint lodged abroad against the corporate owner of an oil palm plantation in Océan. In another case, LandCam's investigations into wrongdoings by a small-scale mining company led the Ministry of Mines to cancel its licence.

Supporting the appropriation of tools and facilitating mobilisation

The impact of these activities mainly depended on the extent to which community members took ownership of them. Our experiences in different sites enabled us to identify the factors that encourage community buy-in and focus our efforts more effectively as the project progressed.

Efforts to reinforce local uptake of these tools included identifying and training people who could act as contact points, take the lead in pursuing agreed strategies, and maintain a certain momentum within the community even after the project ended. They also acted as 'focal points' for the team, enabling them to maintain links with the communities concerned and follow up cases remotely.

However, it could be hard to generate this kind of momentum within a community. Sometimes it fizzled out before people could come together to formulate their demands and effectively present them to more powerful actors or institutions. We found that our training approach had various limitations in terms of targeting individuals that we could meet and work with, and the format, means and media we used to convey messages. This meant that certain adjustments had to be made over the course of the project, as shown in Box 2.

Box 2. Main feedback and adjustments

We set up a tool to monitor and assess the impact of the actions taken in each pilot site, and used the information gathered during the first half of the project to clarify the needs of the people that it was intended to support. Many wanted to better understand the framework for land and natural resource governance, compensation mechanisms for customary rights, conflict resolution mechanisms, and to be better prepared to take the lead in actions to defend their rights.

This feedback also led us to change the way that we engaged with community members. We had initially intended to work mainly with community leaders, and rely on them to share what they had learned with other members of the community. When we noticed that that the information was diluted as it was passed around, it seemed more appropriate to deliver the message directly to our target audience to ensure that it was widely understood and appropriated. This meant that we had to change the way that capacity-building campaigns were organised, mainly by deploying more teams and using more varied, contextualised themes.

We also supported local people's efforts to organise and mobilise within their community. Initiatives such as the multiparty dialogue in Dja, which brought together local communities, investors, local government, civil society and conservation stakeholders, showed that communities that do not speak with one voice in these spaces are less able to state their case clearly (Sonkoue et al., 2020; Sonkoue and Ngono, 2023). More upstream work was therefore needed to support internal discussions and enable community members to think collectively about their priorities and strategy for dealing with other stakeholders.

2.2 Mobilising different stakeholder groups

The project worked with a wide range of other stakeholders, in addition to communities. This provided a better understanding of each group's position, interests and concerns, and was a way of creating opportunities for exchange and collective impetus for concrete demands for reform. The aim was to use this mobilisation to find 'allies' who would understand, endorse and defend common objectives. These diverse partnerships enabled the project to develop and consolidate links with complementary sectors, and thereby facilitate a more coordinated approach.

The project built numerous links with actors from civil society and academia, through a combination of training activities, cross-sectoral exchange workshops to build consensus and collective positions, and collaborations and programmes to decentralise funding to support local actions and improve knowledge of land realities across the country.

Mapping different views

Many sectors work in areas that are directly or indirectly related to land: environmental conservation and protection, forestry and mining, development, agriculture, projects that work with refugees and internally displaced persons, and other humanitarian initiatives. But many of these projects take little account of land issues. This may be due to limited technical knowledge, lack of opportunities for peer-to-peer collaboration and learning, or because the funding models used by development institutions are too sectoral and lack coherence.

LandCam wanted to better reflect the importance of this cross-cutting dimension by developing a systemic and coherent approach for all the sectors associated with land matters. This required a better understanding of the concerns of other civil society actors, so the project drew up as exhaustive a list as possible of their views and proposals, which were then categorised, analysed and studied for potential gaps. This helped identify the major priority themes and a range of proposed solutions for issues such as the definition of property rights and land use rights, the many inconsistencies in land and natural resource governance, and shortcomings in the expropriation and compensation system.

This preliminary diagnosis was an essential step in enabling nongovernmental actors to develop a framework for the reform process that would hopefully give the administration something to work on. We defined five guiding principles for the reform, suggesting that it should:

1. be an **inclusive process**,
2. have an overall objective of **improving security of tenure**,
3. recognise **legitimate customary land rights**,
4. establish a **clear framework**, and
5. comprehensively cover **all issues relevant to land rights**.

This was the first time that work had been done to gather different views on the land reform and present a coordinated vision for the reform process. The aim was to encourage the government use these principles to produce and adopt a roadmap setting out the next steps in the process.

Consolidating existing organisations and networks

To ensure that the reform is inclusive, we had to encourage as many of the stakeholders that we had identified as possible to engage in the process. As noted above, positions within civil society were poorly coordinated and sometimes limited by a lack of understanding of the wide range of issues to be considered. It was therefore important to build bridges between these various fields of intervention and highlight the cross-cutting nature of land issues. LandCam accordingly organised meetings and training activities that created exchange and learning opportunities for actors from civil society, academia, the media and community as well as government representatives.

For example, the project organised a number of workshops on various land-related issues to look at key problems and current events in Cameroon. This helped the various actors directly or indirectly involved in land matters better align their agendas.

These interactions also enabled the team to assess different stakeholders' needs and propose appropriate tools to respond to them. The project developed guides for actors involved in humanitarian and development projects on how to take account of land issues; guides for practitioners on how to approach gender issues in a situated and nuanced way; and guides for companies on how to support the creation of platforms for dialogue with communities that are impacted by their activities.

Developing a harmonised and coherent vision

In the same spirit, LandCam succeeded in creating a strong coalition of stakeholders around land issues, bringing together journalists, technical and financial partners, traditional chiefs, parliamentarians, and representatives of ministries, civil society, rural communities and Indigenous Peoples. This was not a collective in the strict sense of the term, but rather a series of one-off efforts to mobilise actors around different themes and consolidate networks. This multi-actor momentum gave us access to important new platforms, and a legitimacy that would have been lacking had there been fewer participants and less coordination. It also added weight to our jointly formulated proposals.

Having organised numerous discussions with this wide range of stakeholders and analysed the positions taken by various civil society groups, the project drew up a series of coherent proposals on the issues to be addressed by the reform. These were set out in a Policy Note (CED, 2020) that proposed relevant solutions to address the shortcomings of current laws and practices. The Note was endorsed by numerous civil society partners, who added their logos to it and helped disseminate it. As well as stimulating debate on specific land issues, the Note enabled the project to present the authorities and general public with a holistic proposal that incorporated the lessons learned from our actions and the views of the communities and civil society organisations (CSOs) that we worked with.

LandCam was able to change the dominant discourse on certain aspects of land issues by mobilising and coordinating stakeholders, drawing up joint proposals and repeatedly disseminating them through various channels (events, personal meetings, the media, social networks, community radio). There was little support for recognising customary land tenure regimes as a form of collective community ownership when the project started, but the emphasis on this point in the policy recommendations led the government to mention it in numerous speeches and discussions.

Decentralising funds and promoting local expertise

LandCam involved a large number of Cameroonian CSOs in its activities through partnerships and programmes to decentralise funds that support local actions ('micro-grants').

Working with local actors and organisations that are closer to target populations and stakeholders gave us access to settings that national organisations do not necessarily understand due to the wide variety of customs in Cameroon. This approach helped us address the issue of local legitimacy by intervening with people who are often marginalised by projects, and documenting and articulating the realities of those people that projects most affect. The programme to decentralise funding was designed to actively recognise certain actors who were better placed to understand the complex issues and dynamics in particular contexts, and create a space where practitioners and citizens could share and exchange their knowledge and experiences from previous interventions and the LandCam project.

This programme supported projects that tackle a wide range of key land and resource governance issues and take greater account of the rights of different segments of the Cameroonian population, such as refugees and internally displaced persons, women in various contexts, and those facing expropriations and other problems generated by extractive activities. Their views and local realities were recorded and represented in proposals for the reform and the Policy Note, and the network of organisations that work on land issues was also strengthened.

Finding entry points for dialogue and cooperation

Engagement with other civil society actors and other sectors sometimes revolved around specific cases and current events. This paved the way for broader dialogues that showed the relevance of looking at land issues in a cross-cutting way. For example, the controversial and well-publicised development projects in Ebo forest (FERN, 2023) and large-scale plantations in Campo Ma'an (Ngeunga, 2022) initially led to many interventions by local, national and international actors highlighting the social and/or environmental repercussions of these projects. But their interventions were uncoordinated, often isolated, and frequently focused on the intervening actors' own priorities. The organisations that worked with LandCam helped bring them together around one table so that they could better understand

each other's positions, paving the way for more comprehensive thinking based on sectoral interactions and dynamics (see Box 3).

Box 3. Varied outcomes of mobilisations in Ebo and Campo Ma'an

A key issue in both cases was limiting the deforestation that would be caused by logging in Ebo and the development of an oil palm plantation in Campo Ma'an. Despite their similarities, the mobilisation campaigns produced very different results, demonstrating the complex dynamics at play in each case.

The campaign to protect Ebo forest garnered significant support at both the international level and from cooperation actors in Cameroon. This helped slow the process and led to a review of the decision to proceed with the initiative, although the situation was still causing concern when this report was written.

The development of the plantation at Campo Ma'an began with intensive forest clearances that caused serious tensions between those who support the project, saying that it is good for local development, and those who oppose it because of the social and/or environmental problems created by cutting the forest and/or the absence of efforts to consult and compensate local communities.

These differences clearly illustrate the limited opportunities for action or change when dialogue is restricted by very different or even irreconcilable viewpoints. Each actor has their own perspective, shaped by their particular sector, field of intervention and possibly their financial partners' priorities. This can negatively affect their understanding or consideration of the nuances of social and environmental issues, and these differences may then be reflected in the proposed solutions, which sometimes omit key factors that would allow threatened areas to be protected effectively.

The tragic conflict that led to dozens of deaths and the displacement of tens of thousands of people in the Far North region of Cameroon in 2021 provided another space to mobilise various groups around a substantive debate and add weight to key messages for the reform. Although the media mainly presented the conflict as an inter-ethnic issue, the root of the problem actually lay in territorial disputes over available water resources in the area, and the impact that climate change is having on them. Looking at the conflict through this prism, particularly in the press, helped raise public and government awareness of the issues at stake in the reform.

LandCam also often used special national and international occasions to mobilise stakeholders, holding annual workshops to mark Women's Rights Day (8 March) and International Indigenous Peoples' Day (9 August), and highlight the challenges associated with these themes. These workshops created a direct link between these topical global issues and the situation in Cameroon, giving them a real legitimacy that was endorsed by many international institutions. They were also good opportunities to issue communiqués and collective position papers on topics such as the difficulties that women who live near agro-industrial operations

in Océan department have to contend with, and what they need to guarantee their security and rights; or protecting traditional territories and knowledge in the context of COVID-19, and measures that the administration could adopt in this respect.

New actors who can maintain the momentum: future land experts and the media

As part of its support for sustained commitment and long-term action on land issues, LandCam wanted to ensure that there will be people outside the project who can take up these debates and continue to mobilise after it ends. To this end, the team worked with academics and the media as well as NGOs, in order to improve the critical understanding of individuals in sectors that will play a key role in shaping resource management in the years to come.

A land expertise centre for the future

LandCam set up the 'Land Experts of Tomorrow' programme to support Masters and PhD students whose subjects directly or indirectly relate to land and natural resources. Students from a variety of disciplines (geography, anthropology, sociology, history, law, economics, environmental sciences etc) attended training courses designed to provide them with the tools they need to better articulate their subjects and hone their research and analytical skills. University lecturers were also on hand to facilitate the process of supervising these students.

This programme, which involved over 40 students, increased the number of individuals with a keen understanding of the complexity of land issues. Their knowledge and vision, which are set out in a book (Kossoumna Liba'a and Nguiffo, 2024), will be essential in guiding future action on land issues as they pursue careers in academia, government or civil society. In fact, one of the requests that came up repeatedly during discussions about what would happen after the project ended was for continued accessible training on land issues. The programme helped create a 'centre of expertise' to help alleviate the lack of technical expertise to address increasingly pressing land issues.

Improving journalists' understanding of land issues

The LandCam project worked regularly with the media, which plays a key role in raising public awareness and documenting and highlighting little-known aspects of land-related problems. We used various strategies to improve the quantity and quality of media coverage and increase the number of professionals in the media who are interested in these issues, consolidating their knowledge and research methods, and creating a group of 'specialist' journalists who know each other and can continue to investigate these matters after the project ends.

LandCam organised thematic and methodological training courses for interested journalists to refine their investigative skills and understanding of contextual factors such as natural resource regimes and laws, and the taxes and royalties associated with resource exploitation, etc. We also produced briefing notes for the media, to draw their attention to salient topics and concrete aspects of land issues (such as coastal communities' access to natural resources) and possibly prompt them to report on such matters.

To consolidate media commitment to this field, we organised an annual programme that provides financial and technical support for reporting on land matters. This programme enabled journalists whose project proposals were accepted to familiarise themselves with new themes and fresh approaches to their work. Some say that they learned a great deal from their field visits to unfamiliar places, which sometimes opened up new reporting opportunities that they have pursued independently.

In order to generate greater long-term interest in land issues, we developed and produced a fortnightly land journal for several years, and shared it with a group of journalists to keep them in touch with national, regional and international land affairs. We also made a point of inviting journalists to the numerous multi-stakeholder workshops that we organised and press conferences held at key moments in the project, so that they could follow and write about the debates.

These complementary efforts to engage with the media helped establish a standing group of around 15 journalists with an interest in land issues. There has been a clear and steady increase in the number of written articles and television reports about land, with some covering LandCam's work and some investigative pieces. Over the course of the project we also saw a real improvement in the quality of this coverage, and much more substantive engagement with the issues under discussion.

Making LandCam part of a wider movement to protect land rights

The project covered many global issues that other organisations and networks are working on, such as translating the Food and Agriculture Organization's (FAO) Voluntary Guidelines on the Responsible Governance of Tenure of Land into national laws and practices, regulating land-based investments, recognising and protecting the rights of Indigenous Peoples and rural communities, and inclusive land and natural resource governance. Although the COVID-19 pandemic restricted opportunities for exchange, we participated in various conferences and online meetings to ensure that project actions reflected developments in global debates.

LandCam also supported exchanges between members of the Cameroonian government and their counterparts in other countries, in order to strengthen and nurture interactions between the international and local levels. For example, a representative of the Ministry of Lands took part in international meetings facilitated by the FAO to facilitate sharing on land issues. And in 2017, former members of the ministries responsible for land management and civil society organisations in

Mali and Burkina Faso attended the first session of the Government–Parliament Dialogue in Cameroon, to share their countries' approaches to securing land tenure, participation by decentralised local authorities and traditional authorities, and oversight by competent public administrations. This enabled Cameroonian stakeholders to see how other countries have tackled similar issues, providing food for thought and helping better situate Cameroon in these debates. It also gave greater credibility to the messages conveyed by the project.

The organisations that implemented LandCam are members of international networks that champion land issues, and they used these alliances as opportunities to join global initiatives such as the Land Rights Now¹ campaign in 2020, which aimed to mobilise committed citizens, the media, communities and organisations around the world to denounce the criminalisation of rights advocates. The domestic issues raised on these occasions were shared at different levels.

Engaging with 'less accessible' actors: the private sector

It can be hard to engage in dialogue with actors from the private sector, as their interests are often in tension with those of civil society groups that accuse them of social and environmental abuses. In order to overcome the longstanding mistrust between these two groups, we developed activities that helped us better understand the position of certain private-sector actors, and in some cases encouraged them to take greater account of the rights of the people and communities affected by their operations.

LandCam monitored numerous conflicts between communities and investors in different parts of the country, and in some cases helped set up platforms for multi-stakeholder dialogue to try to resolve them. One case involved a multinational agro-industrial plantation in the Dja wildlife reserve, which is a protected area in southern Cameroon. Since the concession was awarded in 2008, the rubber plantation has encroached on land previously used by local people. This caused conflict between the community and the investor, and led to tensions within and between broader groups of actors, particularly affecting communities, traditional authorities, local and regional authorities, and conservationists.

Establishing constructive dialogue in this situation entailed talking to representatives of the company, as no concrete change was possible unless the company was willing to make real compromises on a range of matters, such as the plantation's boundaries and operating plan, local jobs, benefit sharing, improvements and compensation. Although the dialogue had limited results in terms of generating positive change for the affected communities, work with the parent company did lead it to commit to a 'zero deforestation' policy and to leave certain areas uncleared as the concession is developed.

1. See <https://tinyurl.com/597arsz2>

Our overall experience of dialogue with private actors highlighted the fact that even when businesses want to “do the right thing”, they may have little idea how to go about it. In addition to having different worldviews, the representatives of several companies that we met had no deep understanding of the social and environmental issues that can be directly and indirectly linked to their investments – even when their company had hired staff to look into such matters. When discussions with a number of individuals sensitive to community issues revealed the extent of these information and guidance gaps, LandCam developed a guide to help them set up frameworks for dialogue with local communities. The proposed approach in this guide considers the existing balance of power between the different parties concerned, and highlights the need for communities to have *independent* support in their dealings with companies.

Many companies were reluctant to engage with the project because they had different perspectives on the situation. It should be noted, however, that representatives of the private sector did attend several events organised by LandCam over the six years, including the Land Weeks and the Government–Parliament Dialogues. Although they did not necessarily take an active part in the discussions, they heard the ideas that were debated. Inviting them also helped consolidate CSOs’ legitimate place in these debates, and showed that the government increasingly recognised their legitimacy. This helped raise awareness about human rights and normalise the idea that private actors are responsible for protecting such rights.

Finally, the project met actors from the private sector in spaces where CSOs rarely go, such as the 2019 PROMOTE International Business Forum, where LandCam led thematic workshops to demonstrate the relevance and value of taking land issues into account in investments.

2.3 Investing in the policy arena

Civil society has generally played a marginal role in Cameroonian policy and there is no history of drafting its laws in an inclusive or participatory way. LandCam’s approach to the reform process therefore broke new ground by creating spaces where the administration could meet citizens, and proposing new ideas on how to improve land and natural resource governance. No other project in Cameroon has succeeded in encouraging this level of dialogue between the government, citizens and other stakeholder groups. Its sustained efforts to cultivate and guide these spaces were only possible because of the trust it built with the different parties concerned. Having developed sufficient credibility to share their views on land matters with decision-makers, LandCam, and by association CED and RELUFA, are now regarded as reference points for land issues in Cameroon.

Effectively involving citizens in a reform process to ensure that the content of the reform is legitimate is a long-term endeavour. The aim is to co-create solutions that respond to citizens’ needs and thereby encourage adherence to the new law when

it is implemented. This section reviews the lessons learned from the project's efforts at the national level, particularly in terms of operating in a policy arena beset by numerous obstacles.

Getting key actors involved in the process

The project engaged with many of the numerous different networks and stakeholder groups that operate on the policy scene, finding areas of convergence and involving them in the advocacy process.

LandCam worked closely with partners in decision-making spaces from the outset, using these collaborations to bring them together and consolidate their respective priorities through a more coordinated and systemic approach. The project's partners included:

- **The Network of Parliamentarians for Sustainable Management of Forest Ecosystems in Central Africa (REPAR).** Parliamentarians were involved from the start of the project, to help deliver its advocacy messages and give them resonance. They also supported several Government–Parliament Dialogues that took place in the context of LandCam. Thanks to this collaboration, the project was invited as a credible party to an extraordinary session of the National Assembly held in 2022.
- **The Network of Traditional Rulers for the Conservation of Biodiversity and Sustainable Management of the Congo Basin Ecosystems in Central Africa (RECTRAD).** Traditional chiefs and traditional authorities are seen as essential and legitimate actors who should be listened to and involved in land governance matters due to their role as intermediaries between the administration and the communities that they represent.
- **The National Engagement Strategy (NES)** on land governance, which was coordinated by the International Land Coalition (ILC), was in operation when LandCam was being implemented. It was also intended to open up multi-stakeholder spaces to improve land governance in Cameroon by taking greater account of people's rights. The fact that CED is a member of the ILC helped ensure that actions by the two initiatives complemented each other.
- **A large number of ministries are involved in land issues.** Given the lack of coherence between sectors, it was important to involve them as closely as possible in the discussions and workshops organised by the project. Where possible, the project developed close relationships with members of these ministries, which were invaluable in facilitating meetings and creating entry points and support for LandCam's messages.

Building trust in order to change the prevailing discourse

Building trust is a crucial step in creating and maintaining dialogue between stakeholders, particularly the government. This requires an understanding of each actor's views and concerns, and ensuring that stakeholders are involved in the process and exposed to new perspectives in a way that acknowledges their positions and their fears. It is essential to develop alternative ideas gradually to ensure that they are understood and assimilated into peoples' thought processes; and helpful to start with the least controversial or most useful ideas, such as those that address an urgent problem.

There has been extensive media coverage of a number of land-related conflicts in Cameroon in recent years. In 2021 a territorial dispute in the Far North resulted in numerous deaths and created over 60,000 refugees; and in one case in 2022, 90 families in Douala had their land expropriated to make way for a new hotel (Foute, 2023). The need to resolve serious cases like this underlined the relevance of a project whose approach was rooted in the country's land realities, and the knowledge and numerous research activities undertaken by LandCam and its partner organisations gave them the legitimacy to talk about these issues.

Although there are many ideas about how to resolve Cameroon's diverse land issues, they are often unfounded and do not necessarily constitute appropriate or effective responses. A common example of this is the idea that land tenure can be secured through land registration and individual land titles.

There have been times when the government has favoured this approach, and it still has broad public support. Transhumant people might therefore think that it would solve their land security problems. However, our research showed that it would not, raising an important question: Should we invest in raising awareness among this vast group and discussing why what they were asking for would not work? Or proceed with our proposals and risk giving the impression that we didn't represent the people we claimed to be defending?

One of the challenges the project faced was managing these contradictions and unequal access to information. We had to demonstrate why certain proposals would not work, provide evidence to back up our positions, and explain why alternative approaches were needed. We hoped that this would give decision-makers the opportunity to compare new ideas with existing proposals, and highlight sectoral inconsistencies.

Opening up spaces for dialogue and 'bringing the village to the minister'

The project organised numerous multi-stakeholder exchange workshops over its six-year lifespan. Its most innovative achievements in terms of national platforms for dialogue were the Land Tenure Weeks and Government–Parliament Dialogues.

The Land Tenure Weeks were multi-stakeholder forums that LandCam first held in 2019, and then in 2021 and 2022 when the national policy calendar and COVID-19 restrictions allowed. These events included various thematic workshops with introductory presentations by the team and time to discuss numerous topics. At some points they were attended by over 1,000 people, with participants ranging from civil society organisations, local representatives setting out their communities' problems and perspectives, traditional chiefs, members of various ministries and other government institutions, the private sector, donors and technical and financial partners, and the media. The numerous themes on the agenda included women's and Indigenous Peoples' rights, taking account of pastoralism, land-based investments, different land registration approaches, and the FAO's Voluntary Guidelines, to name but a few.

It was the first forum of this size and kind to take place in Cameroon, bringing the government face to face with members of rural and indigenous communities in a space where they could have frank discussions about land issues. The Land Tenure Weeks led to recommendations on a range of topics that were subsequently included in many official statements. A real measure of their success and popularity is the fact that MINDCAF helped organise the last Land Tenure Week held during the project and promised to keep them going after the project ends, and that the majority of participants wanted this valuable space for learning and deliberation to become a permanent fixture. Institutionalising Land Tenure Weeks demonstrates the relevance of this initiative, which met a clear need for both the government and its citizens.

The project also facilitated three dialogues between parliamentarians and the government. Each focused on a specific theme: sharing experiences of land management in Africa (2017), civil society proposals for reform (2020), and the challenges of commercial land concessions (2022).

Forums such as the Land Tenure Weeks and Government–Parliament Dialogues are major events that bring government and citizens together. They could not have taken place without the large number of equally important smaller workshops held throughout the project, which ensured the ongoing engagement and presence of representatives from different ministries, and enabled them to follow and contribute to the project's work. These workshops were the first time that decision-makers in Cameroon had the opportunity to meet people they do not usually come across and listen to their proposals, often in quite informal settings where the comparative lack of protocol allowed for frank exchanges of ideas and perspectives. Government representatives may not have shared the views of other participants, but these workshops exposed them to new ideas and gave them the opportunity to consider and respond to them.

One of the project's key aims was to cultivate and guide new spaces for discussion, and expose parliamentarians and members of the government to innovative ideas. In addition to making Land Tenure Weeks a permanent fixture, MINDCAF also

expressed an interest in creating a platform around the FAO's Voluntary Guidelines. This platform was set up during the project's final Land Week; the challenge now is ensuring that it becomes and remains operational.

Some of the project's key achievements in the policy arena

LandCam made considerable progress in helping improve the government's understanding of land issues. This can mainly be seen in:

- **MINDCAF changing its position on individual land titles**, which were previously seen as a key tool for securing land. The administration's position evolved over the course of the project as it came to recognise that security of tenure involves broader issues, such as protecting customary rights and village lands.
- **Recognition of the need to decentralise land governance** down to the local level and give mayors powers and a place on Land Consultative boards.
- **Greater awareness of Indigenous Peoples' extremely precarious situation**, not only in terms of their security of tenure and socioeconomic conditions, but also their recognition and acceptance in Cameroonian society. The project raised the profile of this marginalised and discriminated-against group of citizens, particularly in terms of the land-related challenges they face. While this aspect of land governance remains a thorny issue on which consensus has yet to be reached, it is now under discussion.
- **Better understanding of the issues associated with women's land rights.** The project not only highlighted the impact that women's land rights have on societal issues such as food security, safeguarding knowledge and practices, and households' economic stability; it also took a nuanced approach to the topic, articulating it in terms of rights of use, access, participation in decision-making, and land quality. This marked a shift from the previous focus on land titles as a tool for recognising and securing women's land rights.
- **Official communications from MINDCAF include many of the project's recommendations.** The most notable examples of this are the recommendations made at a special session of Parliament in 2021 and the Government–Parliament Dialogue in 2022, regarding the need for better oversight of land allocation procedures for investments and determining their size and duration; and the need to better protect communities' customary land rights.
- **MINDCAF has issued over 50 circular letters to remedy various shortcomings in land governance in recent years.** The most significant steps taken in this respect were the suspension of direct registrations and concessions from national lands in 21 departments in 2020; and the reminder in 2022 that 'certificates of waiver of customary rights' are illegal, which was intended to better protect customary land rights.
- **MINDCAF institutionalised some of the project's innovations**, such as the Land Tenure Week forum.

- **The Ministry of Agriculture recognised the FAO's Voluntary Guidelines** as useful guiding principles for thinking on rural land management in Cameroon.
- **Stronger links and frequent exchanges with the authorities**, which mainly involved calling on LandCam and its organisations' expertise on specific issues.
- **The formal request in the final communiqué of a special Parliamentary session on land issues for recognition of LandCam's contribution** in promoting land governance in Cameroon, and the recommendation that that the project be renewed.

3. Final thoughts and outlook

LandCam broke new ground in Cameroon in terms of mobilising a wide range of stakeholders and supporting diverse activities. It also generated numerous lessons for the organisations and actors that implemented and contributed to the project. The project approach was rooted in the Cameroonian context, but can nevertheless provide food for thought for countries facing similar issues with land and natural resource governance, or inclusive and legitimate processes for formulating laws. Although the reform process had yet to be completed when this report was written, the landscape in which it is taking place has certainly changed, with civil society now recognised as a legitimate actor to be invited onto the policy stage and help maintain the momentum when the new law is implemented. LandCam also established a platform for empirical data, formulated constructive and achievable reform proposals, developed effective mechanisms for collaboration and dialogue at the national level, and increased trust between all the actors involved in the process. These achievements will play a key role in taking the reform forward and creating the political space for its adoption. Some final thoughts on the process are presented below.

3.1 On the interface between local realities, the policy arena and citizen mobilisation

- There is a disconnect between the slow and uncertain timeline of the reform process and the need for immediate change on the ground. As the process follows its course, rights violations continue and many people across the country struggle to survive from day to day. Local interventions may raise expectations that living conditions will improve; a lack of quick, visible results may therefore be discouraging, and it can be hard for affected people to see that project activities are contributing to a reform process that might improve their living conditions at some point in the distant future.
- It is not always easy for people to risk exposing themselves to being 'part of history' and act in the long-term interests of the reform when it adversely affects their immediate individual rights and interests. Cameroon is a country where processes often operate informally and unforeseen events frequently arise. People who help expose systemic problems that hinder good governance practices can be vulnerable to reprisals.
- It is easy to mobilise public opinion around simplistic solutions, but harder to address issues in a thorough and nuanced way. The responses that the project formulated for the reform need to be prioritised according to their resonance with people's lived experiences and demonstrable relevance to the situations they face.

3.2 On engagement with the government

- Civil society actors find it hard to make themselves heard and have an impact when their proposals are not coherent. This underlines the importance of clarifying their positions, and understanding and developing common positions on issues of concern.
- The project's sustained efforts to work with government led to fruitful collaboration on the repositioning of civil society in public debates. While it is good news that the Government has taken up certain activities, such as Land Tenure Week, there is also a risk that it will change the way that issues are presented and addressed at these events.

3.3 What are the prospects for the future?

Land issues have not disappeared now that the project has ended. One of the main challenges is ensuring that the work that has been done continues, maintaining the momentum that has been generated. The land community recognises the quality of the proposals put forward by LandCam, which helped lay the foundations for a credible reform process and created spaces for ongoing dialogue as it proceeds.

- It is important to keep cultivating the spaces that LandCam created in order to guide the rest of the reform, and to continue to do so as the new law is implemented. Civil society should be able to participate in and monitor these processes in the way that a watchdog committee or observatory would.
- It is essential to ensure that funding is available to enable citizens and civil society to effectively monitor and participate in the development and implementation of the reform. Reimagining policy processes and building their societal legitimacy are long-term endeavours that cannot be undertaken effectively through short-term projects with fragmented and uncertain funding, or in response to development agencies' strategic priorities, which change according to external interests.
- Different donors need to coordinate their priorities for the countries that they work in. Because project proposals are not always based on previous projects' achievements, new initiatives may undermine any momentum that has been generated or even counteract previous progress (imagine, for example, financial support to disseminate the 1974 law on land tenure and promote individual land titles, as happened in some countries where civil society has spent decades campaigning to reform an unsuitable system).
- Land-related professions and sectors need support to enable them to better understand land issues. Such support was repeatedly requested in numerous workshops and multi-stakeholder meetings, to deal with the shortage of government, academic and civil society actors qualified to work on these issues.

The government and donors should help develop training and university courses in relevant fields, in collaboration with civil society actors that have a good grasp of the issues.

- Drafting and adopting the new law are only the first steps in the reform process. It could then take another decade to develop and enforce the implementing legislation, create and train institutions, develop monitoring tools, and make the necessary revisions to reflect the principles that underpin good practice. The Cameroonian government therefore urgently needs to draw up a clear roadmap and take this process forward, while civil society continues to play a key role in monitoring and participation.

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LandCam: Lessons from six years of linking action, research and advocacy to support land reform

The LandCam project ran from 2017 to 2023, working to support the fair and inclusive reform of land governance in Cameroon at local and national levels. It sought to address historical gaps in citizen participation in the policy process and encourage inclusive dialogue between government and civil society, through an innovative approach that used a combination of research, mobilisation and policy advocacy to address the country's complex land governance issues.

This report describes the background to the project, its approach and activities, the strategies adopted to respond to the land challenges in Cameroon, the obstacles it encountered and what it achieved. By promoting inclusive and sustainable land governance, mobilising a wide range of stakeholders, creating new spaces for training and dialogue, and formulating effective and sustainable policy solutions, LandCam helped improve understanding of land issues at various levels, and led to changes in the position taken by government bodies.

This report is the result of collaborative work between the project teams, who hope that the lessons learned from LandCam can inform discussions on the future of the land reform in Cameroon, and thinking by land actors in other countries.



Knowledge
Products

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