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# SHIFTING CULTIVATION, GENDER, AND REDD+ IN CAMEROON AND THE DEMOCRATIC REPUBLIC OF CONGO<sup>1</sup>

## Executive Summary

Shifting cultivation – also called swidden, slash-and-burn, or rotational cultivation – is the natural resource management system that underpins food production and livelihoods in the forest zones of Central African and many other countries. It has been identified as a key driver of deforestation in Central Africa and is hence the focus of many international initiatives and projects that come under the rubric of REDD+ (Reducing Emissions from Deforestation and Forest Degradation and the role of conservation, sustainable management of forests and enhancements of forest carbon stocks).

This report presents the findings of field studies on shifting cultivation in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) and Cameroon that the Forest Carbon, Markets and Communities (FCMC) Program commissioned. The field research was conducted in coordination with the Central African Program on the Environment (CARPE), a United States Agency for International Development (USAID) regional conservation and climate change program. Between November 2012 and March 2013, the study team spent 75 days in the DRC and Cameroon and conducted about 300 group or individual, semi-structured stakeholder interviews using a snowball sampling strategy in eight rural sites (Figure 2), as well as in Yaoundé, Cameroon, and Kinshasa, DRC. About half the interviews were conducted with women.

In the sites visited, shifting cultivation is the primary form of agriculture practiced in primary and secondary forests. The shifting cultivation systems discussed here largely produce subsistence crops; however, households also produce crops for sale and grow perennial cash crops such as cocoa and coffee. Generally women carry out the bulk of agricultural labor, although in some areas men clear and burn the sites in preparation for planting. While women play a critical role in agriculture in these regions, their role in REDD+ thus far has been limited.

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<sup>1</sup> This brief summarizes findings from the full report: Pollini, Jacques. (2015). Shifting Cultivation, Gender and REDD+ in Cameroon and the Democratic Republic of Congo. USAID-supported Forest Carbon Markets and Communities (FCMC) Program. Washington, DC, USA.

At the sites in Cameroon, cocoa agroforestry provides significant incomes, but plantations are distinct from food-crop fields and are typically controlled by men. The success of smallholder cocoa cultivation attracts people to the forest frontier. Farmers leave lands with higher population density, declining fertility, and aging cocoa plantations to establish new cocoa plantations in forests. With the development of road networks, larger investors are also attracted to forest areas to establish large-scale oil palm and rubber tree plantations. This trend of large-scale plantations is already developing in Cameroon, although not at the sites visited. This dynamic reverses a trend of large-scale plantation decline during the past couple of decades.

At the DRC sites, cultivation of perennial cash crops such as coffee, cocoa, and plantains has been declining since the 1990s. This trend has decreased household cash income and placed household food security at risk. Household vulnerability has been exacerbated further by weak markets, increased crop damage from disease, and declining returns from hunting and fishing. The DRC is currently considered the most food-insecure country in the world according to the Global Food Security Index. In many areas, security of tenure for smallholders is weak, and large-scale agricultural, forestry, and mining concessions predominate as land uses.

Given this situation, securing tenure rights and supporting smallholder farmers and other forest dwellers practicing shifting cultivation and other small-scale economic activities may help reduce the risk of larger-scale deforestation carried out by outside loggers and large-scale plantation or other investors. It could also contribute to the reduction of poverty. However, there is no guarantee that this course of action will reduce deforestation if other key constraints remain in place. (Ickowitz et al., 2015)

In some cases, REDD+ and Payment for Ecosystem Services (PES) projects have considered shifting cultivation an unsustainable land use. This perception has been widespread since the colonial era (Colfer et al., 2015). Some projects propose alternatives such as crop rotation; fire suppression; plowing; agroforestry; conservation agriculture; perennial crops; and income-generating activities, such as fish farming, chicken farming, and apiculture. The aim of the alternatives is to progressively diversify and in some instances phase out shifting cultivation while increasing farmers' income and food security. While some farmers appreciate these interventions, many expressed concerns to the study team. Women in particular noted that many proposed techniques required additional labor, which the women were unwilling or unable to provide. Support for the commercialization of non-timber forest products was a positive exception. Villagers also reported that the projects worked primarily with the local men, and very little with the women.

The unpopularity of shifting cultivation alternatives with some intended project beneficiaries, and the failure of certain of the proposed alternatives to meet local needs, may generate anti-conservation and/or anti-nongovernmental organization (NGO) resentments among farmers. Overall poor relations between local and state actors likely exacerbate these negative perceptions. For example, according to some farmers interviewed, forest rangers, or eco-guards, often do not respect the civil rights of the villagers and make no distinction between subsistence and commercial hunting.

Financial transfers to local communities are promoted through community forestry operations, PES schemes, and conventional rural development activities. In all visited sites, local associations or committees channel and manage the money. Most of these are newly created with support from an NGO or project proponent. Many of the villagers interviewed criticized these local institutions for favoring the relatives and friends of their leaders (elite capture), for their lack of transparency, and for spending money on activities that had limited or no positive impact. Based on these and other findings, the field team offers the following observations to stimulate reflection and guide support for REDD+ programming:

1. Policymakers need to recognize and take into account farmers' capacity to make decisions based on their own means, interests and experiences. Rather than planning the activities of farmers in a top-

down way, REDD+ promoters and managers should work with target beneficiaries to jointly develop appropriate options and incentives to reconcile farmers' objectives (sustainable livelihoods) with the global agenda (conservation and greenhouse gas emission reductions).

2. The "committee-based natural resources management" approach should be more thoroughly assessed, and its promoters should analyze it as a management strategy. To balance the "committee-based" approach, alternative strategies need to be explored and possibly developed in which individual farmers or families could participate and receive direct benefits from forest conservation, which in turn would have to be reconciled with notions of common property regimes. They could become shareholders in a carbon or mixed carbon-commodity enterprise.
3. History has shown that market incentives drive agricultural intensification at large scale. Without improved terms of trade to producers, intensification is unlikely to take hold. With that perspective in mind and with the consent and participation of farmers and other relevant stakeholders, a broad range of intensification options could be considered, including ecological intensification (agroforestry, conservation agriculture); rehabilitation of smallholder plantations; integration of agriculture with livestock husbandry; and capital-intensive approaches, such as the use of animal traction and chemical inputs in savannas and deforested land. Such support could be provided mostly in areas where population density is elevated and soil fertility is declining, so that people can be assisted to remain on their land rather than out-migrate. Communities living in forest areas should have the right and option to adopt more productive and rewarding agricultural practices, i.e., small-scale family farm activities that do not provoke large-scale deforestation, but attention to market structures is needed. Commercialization of non-timber forest products and REDD+ payments could complement other livelihood activities. Thus, a well-constructed incentive framework could be framed within regional planning efforts and coordinated at national scale.
4. Land and resource tenure, use, and/or access rights need to be defined and secured, so that people living in forest areas will be able to invest in their land over time. Benefit-sharing mechanisms for REDD+ and PES schemes must ensure that forest-dependent communities receive both real and tangible incentives to not deforest in addition to an adequate share of the benefits. Tenure security should address management, access, and use rights together with ownership rights. Local institutions have managed these types of rights for centuries de facto. Increased de jure security would allow more flexibility and lower transaction costs if carefully devised to avoid mass-scale land sales. Bylaws governing individual and family rights and responsibilities need to be integrated into tenure regimes to avoid conflict and facilitate investment.
5. Women are the main agricultural labor force and the engine of farming systems transformation. In part this is because food crop farming is largely unprofitable, and women's labor is undervalued even though household food security relies on these efforts. Men are more involved than women in social relationships with projects and other external stakeholders. Pathways to ensure the viable participation of women in REDD+ decision-making need to be identified.
6. Policymakers should develop and/or adapt new analytical tools to study the drivers of deforestation, including existing bottom-up tools. Conventional tools that rely on satellite imagery and correlations between a limited set of variables are useful but insufficient because they often do not capture social elements such as gender and power dynamics at sites. Bottom-up analytical tools for studying drivers exist but need to be developed, promoted, and shared further. Using examples from current REDD+ pilot projects in Cameroon and the DRC, it is clear that REDD+ feasibility studies at the site-level should capture local dynamics including context-specific drivers and biophysical, socioeconomic, and cultural aspects. Without such fine-grained information, REDD+ actions and social and environmental safeguards risk being inadequate, unproductive, or even counter-productive.

The key driver of deforestation is not the type of land use, but rather the investment capacity and the social and economic arrangements that exist between and among stakeholders living on forest frontiers and competing for access to resources. In other words, the fate of primary forests in the regions visited, and possibly in the whole Congo Basin, will depend on which economic model prevails – capital-intensive agribusinesses or family smallholder farms – and not on technical options such as shifting cultivation versus alternatives. Shifting cultivation systems should not be considered an unsustainable land use to be eradicated. Instead, these systems should be recognized as a complex and diverse natural resource management system that has adapted to changing economic and policy conditions over time. Beyond the fate of farmers practicing shifting cultivation, the future of smallholder farming in general is at stake when designing REDD+ policies and projects.

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