

PN-ACA-546

## **NGOs, Environmental Awareness, and Policy Advocacy in Cameroon**

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1993

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## **I. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

Cameroon's NGO sector is presently in a period of rapid change, reflecting the economic and political transitions underway in the society as a whole. Many new NGOs are being formed, their geographic and technical scope of activity is expanding, and the range of professional and technical skills at their command is also beginning to increase. Interest in the role of NGOs as agents of development is now apparent even in areas of the country which historically had less tradition of this form of organization for service delivery. As a result, donors are channeling an increasing proportion of development assistance through NGOs.

At the same time, several factors inhibit a more ambitious agenda for Cameroonian NGOs despite their rapid increase in number. These problems need to be taken into account in designing environmental activities to be implemented by NGOs. These include:

- A reluctance on the part of government to accept NGOs as a full-fledged partner in national development;
- Fears that NGOs are prone to politicization;
- Technical, staffing, management, and funding limitations;
- An image or credibility problem due to poor performance or lack of accountability on the part of some organizations;
- Regional differences with regard to colonial and post-colonial experience of governance and local initiative;
- An ambiguous legal framework, and excessive government discretionary power over NGO activities; and
- Confusion between bona fide NGOs and consulting firms which sometimes represent themselves as "NGOs."

This report identifies four categories of needs to be addressed as part of a strategy for Cameroonian NGOs to become more directly engaged within the environmental sector, which would be necessary in order for them to fulfill the environmental awareness and advocacy roles identified by the USAID Mission in planning for CAMPER:

- expansion of NGO technical capacity;
- clarification of the legal context for NGOs and their institutional identity;
- improved coordination for NGO membership bodies; and
- improving NGO financial stability, accountability, and long-range strategic planning.

The report makes several recommendations for USAID actions which could help to address some of the problems identified in the study:

- clarify NGO support functions and mechanisms in USAID project activities;
- establish an environmental endowment from local currency held by USAID;
- continue to provide support to the Cameroon NEAP, especially with regard to expanding the participatory aspect;
- institute a donor - NGO forum on the environment; and
- help to institute a national environmental awareness campaign.

## **II. INTRODUCTION**

This study was undertaken on behalf of USAID Cameroon by World Resources Institute's Center for International Development and Environment, under a contract from the Biodiversity Support Program in Washington D.C. The Biodiversity Support Program (BSP) is a USAID-funded consortium of three environmental PVOs, World Wildlife Fund, the Nature Conservancy, and World Resources Institute.

The purpose of the study was to assist the Cameroon USAID Mission with an assessment of the Cameroonian NGO sector's ability to contribute to the proposed CAMPER program (*Cameroon Program for Environmental Reform*), particularly in the areas of environmental awareness and policy advocacy.

The field work for this study was carried out during May - June 1993, in conjunction with another WRI study on the role of NGOs in natural resources policy reform in sub-Saharan Africa.

### **III. CAMEROON'S ENVIRONMENTAL NGO SECTOR**

#### **Historic Stagnation, Recent Dynamism**

Prior to the late 1980s, the indigenous NGO sector in Cameroon played little role in national development. The country had a long history of government centralism, leaving little room for NGO initiatives. The government maintained stifling restrictions on associations, including NGOs, which tended to discourage the full development of civil society. This reflected in part the colonial legacy, and also served the purpose of protecting the government from perceived challenges to its authority. Consequently, political considerations have dominated the relationship between government and non-governmental organizations during most of the period since Independence.<sup>1</sup>

This situation began to change as a result of the economic crisis that settled upon Cameroon in the mid- to late 1980s, which forced the government to accept the need for reforms in its economic policies. This trend was reinforced by global political events of 1989-91, including the breakup of the former Soviet Union, the fall of authoritarian regimes in Eastern Europe, and the pro-democracy movement in China. These developments were closely followed across Africa, and brought intense pressure upon deeply entrenched governments in such diverse countries as Mali, Togo, and Zambia. Cameroon was one of many African countries which found itself struggling to adapt to these "winds of change," and quickly responded with a series of concessions to calls for more democratic leadership and greater freedom within the society.

This period marked the beginning of Cameroon's transition - however tentative - toward a multi-party political system along with a freer press and expanded rights of association. Law No. 90/053 of 19 December 1990 (*The Law on Associations*) eased somewhat the control of the Ministry of Territorial Administration over the creation of associations and community organizations in Cameroon. Since 1990 there has been a rapid increase in the number of NGOs, which now number 500 or more, and current trends suggest a continuing expansion in Cameroon's indigenous NGO community at the grassroots level in addition to national organizations.

For many years, NGO activities in Cameroon were dominated by a small number of international agencies. The recent expansion of Cameroon's NGO sector is described by Tanjong *et al.* in a 1991 paper:

*Ten years ago only a handful of international NGOs operated in Cameroon. Today, there are between 12 and 15 international NGOs, about 8 voluntary*

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<sup>1</sup> Observers note certain differences in the experience of anglophone regions vis-a-vis other parts of Cameroon with respect to community organizations and civic activity; this issue is not explored in the present report.

*organizations, 100 indigenous NGOs and 10 rural associations and over 400 village organizations involved in natural resources management and integrated rural development.*<sup>2</sup>

In September 1991, the USAID-funded PVO-NGO/NRMS project published a directory of NGOs working in the NRM sector in Cameroon.<sup>3</sup> By May 1993, this directory - commonly known as "the Green Book" - was described by its authors as obsolete, with an updated edition being planned.

The exodus of civil servants from the public sector through retirement or governmental downsizing represents another impetus for the creation of NGOs. Many such individuals have become interested in establishing organizations to help in the development of their home village or region, as well as to provide employment for themselves or for family members. In many cases, they possess valuable professional skills as well as values oriented toward development. Given that indigenous NGOs have often lacked access to technical skills and managerial expertise, this trend may represent a significant factor in the strengthening of Cameroon's NGO sector.

#### **Government - NGO Relationships: the Struggle for "Space"**

Despite the dramatic growth of indigenous NGOs since the late 1980s (or perhaps because of it), the government continues to harbor ambivalent attitudes. Some officials appear to resent the fact that the growing importance of NGOs is accompanied by a decline in the role of government. Although a new policy of openness has been declared, Cameroon's NGOs still await the introduction of tangible measures to permanently improve the working environment for NGOs. In the meantime, officials continue to exercise discretionary powers in arbitrary ways. For example, senior Divisional Officers have been known to block the application for registration of a new NGO by means of a semantic loophole in the *Law of Associations*, whose text refers to "associations" but makes no provision for "non-governmental organizations."

Episodes such as these suggest that in Cameroon, the burden of proof rests upon the private sector and civil society to justify the need for new organizations, and to secure governmental approval for them, rather than the government having to justify its restrictions. NGOs also cite their exclusion from the newly-created Draft Constitutional Committee (a body with great historical significance for the country) as the latest example of their marginalization.

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<sup>2</sup> USAID/PVO-NGO/NRMS Natural Resources Management Assessment. A Final Report on PVO-NGO Institutional Assessment of Cameroon Natural Resources Management to USAID/Cameroon. Enoh Tanjong, Judith Collins, Michael Brown, and Ndeso-Atanga Ada. Sept. 1991.

<sup>3</sup> Non Governmental Organisations in Natural Resource Management in Cameroon. Ndeso-Atanga Ada and Enoh Tanjong. PVO-NGO/NRMS Cameroon, Yaoundé; September 1991.

Setting aside such examples of the gap between official rhetoric and actual practice, it is clear that a historic shift is taking place in the balance between public and private responsibility for development. As public expenditures become increasingly constrained, less reliance can be placed upon the state to implement development initiatives. As the economic crisis has worsened, the decline in state capability and credibility has accelerated. Budgetary difficulties, poor management, and inadequate supervision have severely limited government services across the country. Given the weakness of the private sector, the big winner in this situation could prove to be the country's NGO sector, which is poised to take over a much larger share of the responsibility for national development.

However, suspicion between government and NGOs continues to pose problems. This is partly because NGOs are a new phenomenon in Cameroon, and there is little experience in managing the relationship between NGOs and government. The government is evidently searching for ways to implement a more tolerant approach toward NGOs while at the same time assuring that their activities are compatible with official policies and priorities. It is also evident that, for many officials, governmental primacy remains a fundamental principle which will not easily be relinquished.

For their part, NGOs wish to defend and enlarge their new-found freedom, and are sensitive to any perceived signs of intrusion or interference by government. As in other African countries, Cameroonian NGOs are wary of governmental attempts to "coordinate" their activities, suspecting attempts to roll back some of their recent gains. To a significant extent, this is a struggle to determine working relationships within a new conception of civil society in Cameroon, whose rules have yet to be written.

While NGOs may well be - as they and their advocates believe - far more efficient and effective at grassroots level activities than government agencies, there remains a need to coordinate their efforts with others, including government. Governmental agencies have a mandate to reach society as a whole, while even the most ambitious NGOs have a more restricted and localized perspective, in both sectoral and geographic terms. Clearly, approaches will need to be found for harmonizing these different and sometimes contradictory considerations, and while Cameroon is only in the early stages of this process, the depth of the economic crisis and the explosive growth of the NGO sector make the task a fairly urgent one.

### **Problems of Legitimacy**

Policy reform is an area in which Cameroon is in the early stages of a potentially far-ranging shift away from the historic tendency toward centralization. Structural adjustment programs and donor requirements are slowly bringing about major changes in both the content of policy and in the way policy is established. This process has been a fitful one, and much remains to be done. Yet the long-term trend toward liberalization, decentralization, and greater transparency and accountability in public life offers significant opportunities for Cameroonian NGOs to make a greater impact in national development. This report assesses some of the constraints which presently inhibit a greater role for the NGO sector in the areas of

environmental awareness and policy advocacy, and offers recommendations for measures to address these constraints.

To some extent, the ongoing tension between Cameroon's NGOs and its government can be understood as a "turf battle." Government officials see the NGO community as a competitor for donor funds, for control over the development process, and less tangibly, for the right to claim to be working on behalf of the people of Cameroon. Given that resources are becoming steadily more scarce, competition for development resources can be expected to intensify in the future.

A more subtle aspect of the competition between the public and private sectors can also be detected, one which relates to issues of political representation and even legitimacy. As in many other countries of sub-Saharan Africa, the government of Cameroon presently faces challenges in terms of defending its political legitimacy. In this context, the rise of a dynamic NGO community working effectively at both the grassroots and the national levels could be seen to have political implications, particularly as the country's constitutional crisis goes on without resolution. The erosion of the governmental apparatus, which formerly held sway in so many sectors of Cameroonian society, accentuates this process as many powers once taken for granted come increasingly into question.

Since many NGO activities are financed from abroad, civil servants sometimes view NGOs as potential agents of foreign influence; more plausibly, they complain that NGOs are diverting resources that would otherwise have been available to the public sector. To some extent, therefore, one important aspect of the government - NGO relationship concerns the flow of resources to the NGO community from external sources, with the government hoping to coordinate or control these, while NGOs seek to maintain their freedom of access to funding. Another element of jealousy or resentment enters into the relationship, as salary scales within some NGOs are now well above those of the civil service, at the same time that NGO staff are less likely to experience the serious payroll arrears now common among government agencies and parastatals.

To some extent, the presence of well-organized NGOs undermines the public sector's traditionally powerful role which affected nearly every aspect of life for the populations under their charge. The government has therefore tempered its new tolerance for NGOs by trying to ensure that most organizations remain limited to the local level, resisting the ambitions of NGOs seeking to broaden their scope to the national level. This impulse is seen in the inclination, mentioned above, to favor applications for registration of new organizations emanating from the grassroots level while groups seeking national status are delayed or rejected. The impacts of this practice have serious consequences in the domain of policy formulation, in which Cameroonian NGOs face formidable obstacles to participation.

Despite these elements of competition and mutual suspicion, more collaboration and cooperation between government and the NGO community is desirable to: avoid unnecessary duplication of efforts; promote equitable distribution of benefits; blend strategies, plans and

activities; establish linkages; share information and experiences; facilitate effective support; and resolve conflicts.

These problems of cooperation and coordination also exist amongst NGOs themselves. Intra-NGO relationships are often plagued by jealousies and internecine bickering, which can lead to excessive competition and undermine public credibility. NGOs compete for funding, for recognition, for status, and are frequently reluctant to share information about themselves and their activities. This situation undermines NGO credibility with government and donors, and can also detract from the quality of work NGOs strive to accomplish.

NGOs, in their desire to acquire credibility, visibility and status, often "bite off more than they can swallow". Because funding is typically linked to a limited set of development themes (AIDS, gender, environment, human rights, etc.), many NGOs are also induced to move into unfamiliar program areas in which funds are perceived to be more readily available. The pattern of donor-driven development activity, short-term project-based funding, and an insecure funding base is widely characteristic of indigenous NGOs, and undermines their ability to develop long-term strategies for accomplishing a well-defined mission based upon local needs and capabilities -- something the donors consider to be desirable.

The rapid expansion of the Cameroonian NGO sector has also raised questions as to the credibility and legitimacy of a good number of so-called "briefcase/letterhead NGOs."<sup>4</sup> Some of these organizations appear in reality to be micro-consulting firms or family businesses trying to make ends meet in an increasingly difficult socioeconomic environment. To the extent that these entities represent a fledgling consulting industry, their contribution to a growing private sector in Cameroon is to be welcomed. The development of this commercially oriented sector should have little bearing on the prospects of true NGOs, that is, not-for-profit organizations with a mandate to carry out charitable, service, advocacy, or research functions.

At the same time, there may well be true NGOs (by the above definition) which are not capable of competently operating the types of programs sought by donors. Ultimately, competence and performance are the yardsticks by which NGOs will be judged. Some marginal or poorly managed organizations will eventually weed themselves out through their inability to perform to an acceptable standard. For their part, donors will find that working through NGOs is often rewarding yet occasionally frustrating. One of the most important lessons for donors in this respect is the need to devise appropriate methods for distinguishing NGOs from consulting enterprises, and developing appropriate programming, contracting, and accountability methods for each respective case.

For NGOs in Cameroon, government registration has often been a difficult process, and once registered, raising funds to carry out field activities can impose additional delays. For

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<sup>4</sup> this is taken to denote organizations which exist on paper but which have no staff, no facilities, and no program.

example, when PRISERI was established, the university lecturers who launched it needed to raise CFAF 4 million to provide the telephones, faxes, and other office equipment which could establish credibility in the eyes of donor agencies. Once established, the process of soliciting funding continues to be a costly one: according to NGOs interviewed for this report, on average more than 30 faxes (in a country with some of the world's most expensive telecommunications rates) are sent to funding agencies in the process of negotiating the details of each new funding proposal.

NGOs are convinced that their capacities will improve over time, and that this maturing process could be greatly enhanced by means of sufficient capacity-building support, presumably from donors. The NGO sector as a whole is presently undergoing an "on-the-job" learning process. As many Cameroonian NGOs are very young in institutional terms, it is often difficult to assess their long-term prospects. This again poses problems for donors: agencies interested in investing in capacity building may find it difficult to establish criteria for selecting among numerous candidate NGOs to support in this way.

In practice, capacity building exercises often occur in "on-the-job" contexts. As NGOs receive grants from donors to carry out field activities, they are presumably learning by doing, gaining experience in project design, administration, evaluation, as well as technical skills (anything from agroforestry to GIS). Many projects also incorporate special training components which presumably would also qualify as "capacity-building" measures. Whether this approach adequately responds to all of the needs is an open question, however. Furthermore, the needs of the NGO sector as a whole are not met by this kind of *ad hoc* approach to capacity building.

Further complicating the task of evaluating NGOs and designing interventions to enhance their capability is the somewhat subjective aspect of much of their work. Raising the level of awareness of local communities through seminars, workshops, etc., is a cardinal feature of NGO activities in many sectors. Achievements in such areas may be hard to quantify, and often yield tangible development results only in the long term.

A fundamental tenet of the development philosophy of most NGOs is the belief that a change of values and attitudes among the members of a community (e.g. attitudes toward conservation) is often as important as the physical outputs achieved by a project (e.g. the number of trees planted). Identifying and discussing a problem are important ingredients of finding an effective solution; in other words, the process may be as important as the product. The contemporary move toward making development more participatory certainly reflects this philosophy, and explains why NGOs feature prominently in many participatory initiatives. The importance of participation, awareness raising, and attitude change represents an important rationale for a stronger role for the NGO sector in efforts to improve Cameroon's environmental management, and for changing public attitudes toward stewardship of the environment.

### **NGO Involvement in the Policy Arena**

Both internal and external pressures will need to be exerted on the government to bring

about a change in official attitude and behaviors toward NGOs, which is necessary to provide an environment more conducive to development of indigenous NGOs. An example of the kind of positive action possible is the recent invitation by the Ministry of Agriculture (MINAGRI) to Cameroonian NGOs to participate in the redrafting of the new Cooperative law. This invitation came about because the *Caisse Centrale de Coopération Economique* (CCCE) insisted that NGOs must be involved in the dissemination of the new law. This marked one of the first occasions for Cameroonian NGO participation in the policy process.

Donor coordination is vital in this process. The benefits of a concerted approach by donors were evident in the overhaul of the cooperative system and the marketing structure of the cocoa and coffee sub-sectors. Similar approaches can be used in other cases, with donors helping to ensure that NGOs are brought fully into the process.

On the whole, however, the policy formulation process in Cameroon remains exclusive and generally non-participatory. NGOs are quick to differentiate between "consultation" and "participation". Government consults with NGOs more frequently than in the past, yet these opportunities typically represent an invitation for NGOs to give their blessing to an already-defined package with very few give-and-take discussions of a substantive nature. The government can subsequently maintain that NGOs were participants in the policy process, thereby meeting the requirements of the donors. This suggests that the donor community could play a key role through monitoring the process of NGO participation, to ensure that it is substantive and inclusive.

In addition, it is becoming recognized that resource users at the local level need to have a greater involvement in the formulation of policies that directly affect their livelihood. In principle, Cameroon's District, Divisional, and Provincial Development Committees are supposed to get input at the local level when formulating policies that affect these localities. However, in practice local resource users are probably even more marginalized than NGOs; on the whole, it is apparent that participation remains something of a theoretical concept.

Sometimes the policies themselves are contradictory. For example, Cameroon's new forestry policy calls for local participation in the management of forests, but then notes that this should take place under the supervision of government. Mixed messages of this type tend to cause confusion and perpetuate the arbitrary exercise of administrative power, discouraging NGOs and local communities.

### **The Need for Environmental Education**

Because local people often lack the skills to enable them to participate effectively in the policy process, more education -- community education, awareness creation, sensitization, etc. - is necessary. The media has a critical role to play in this process, even though the government controlled media (radio and television in particular) have lost a great deal of credibility with the public. If awareness campaigns can avoid becoming politicized (which may be difficult on such issues as logging), it may be possible to avert official censorship.

The print media, notably the growing private press, can also be an effective vehicle for

environmental awareness and education. Environmental education for journalists will be necessary, however, as few Cameroonian reporters are presently familiar with such issues. In fact, little environmental education is currently practiced in Cameroon. The efforts of Living Earth in Buea (integrating environmental education into the curriculum of schools) and World Wildlife Fund (which is drafting a National Environmental Education Action Plan) may help to redress the situation, but these early efforts will need to be expanded.

NGOs also need to be strengthened to assume broader responsibilities; their personnel need training in many areas, especially with regard to their capacity for policy analysis and effective advocacy. While donor agencies are putting substantial efforts into the enhancement of both organizational and technical capacities of Cameroonian NGOs, much remains to be done. Workshops, seminars, training programs, resource centers, networking, and information support systems are among the activities which would help strengthen indigenous NGOs.

Another issue which will become increasingly important in Cameroon is the present lack of "think tank" NGOs; the research and policy gap between the level of the government and the level of NGO field activities is yet to be addressed. Development of research and policy-oriented NGOs will take time, particularly as many donors apparently believe that a successful track record of community level activities is a precondition for participation in policy formulation at the national level. There is no doubt that lessons learnt first-hand at the field level can be very instrumental in effective policy formulation. On the other hand, Enviro-Protect has been cited as an example of a policy-oriented indigenous NGO that does not maintain a field presence in the local communities.

### **Strengthening the NGO Sector**

The spectrum of indigenous NGOs is widening, including grassroots organizations, rural associations, regional associations and national NGOs. Because both the organizational and technical capabilities of these different categories of NGOs are quite different, a careful analysis of each category is necessary to determine its needs and priorities before defining their respective roles in future environmental advocacy activities.

Cameroonian NGOs will eventually have to pursue some form of specialization (without sacrificing their strengths of flexibility, fungibility, adaptability, etc.) to become more effective in their respective fields (forestry, mixed farming, agricultural inputs, etc.). The need to specialize also applies to the federation structures NGOs have recently created (COPAD, FONGEC, CONGAC). These federations were born out of the necessity for NGOs to unite to speak more forcefully and authoritatively with one voice. They fear increased marginalization and inability to influence development policies if they continue to remain divided. A "lone ranger" attitude on the part of individual NGOs undermines the development of the sector as a whole.

Several NGO federations are presently competing for the right to speak for Cameroon's NGOs. Suggestions have been made that NGOs regroup themselves into federations along

specific sectoral lines (e.g. FONGEC, a federation of environmental NGOs). These sectoral federations would serve as a network and facilitator for members, avoiding the risk of evolving into a supra-NGO competing with and undercutting the mandate of its associates. To avoid this eventuality, and to avoid giving the impression of a permanent bureaucracy being created by the formation of these federations, the leadership of these networks, the venue of the meetings, etc., could be on a rotating basis.

Cameroon is a country with a high degree of ecological as well as cultural diversity; in turn, the regions may have distinctly different development priorities. For instance, the Northern region of Cameroon is threatened by desertification. Problems of soil degradation, water management, deforestation, farmer/grazer conflicts, land tenure system, are of primary concern to the inhabitants of this dry savanna area. Meanwhile, in the dense forest zone of the South, concerns center on soil erosion, excessive exploitation of forestry products, degradation of water catchments, and waste management in urban areas.

Zonal networks covering the different subregions and subcultures could be important for information sharing and access to funds for NGOs. Donors, like USAID, can help finance these networks, and regular meetings with them (e.g. twice yearly) will go a long way to build their institutional capacities. Increased contacts between donors and the NGO community will eventually help bring the government to change its attitude towards NGOs.

It is difficult to evaluate how the past three years of NGO experience in Cameroon has affected the base for environmental advocacy. In the longer-term, the presence of stronger organizational structures, better technical capabilities and more widespread field activities will naturally begin to have effects on the policy level. The Cameroon situation suggests a simultaneous approach to providing support for different aspects of indigenous NGO activity as opposed to a phased or sequential approach. Pilot projects in the field that can be replicated and become models for other community projects are likely to have indirect impacts on policy. At the same time, more NGOs need to focus explicitly on policy issues and develop credibility and technical expertise in these areas. Donor support is necessary for both sets of activities.

It is important to note that most indigenous NGOs in Cameroon are still relatively young and untested, and acquiring appropriate technical and organizational skills needs time. If national NGOs can evolve strong organizational structures and solid technical capacities, the chance that government will eventually accept them as serious agents of national development are much higher. Failing this, the stereotypical images of NGOs as fragile, uneducated, technically incapable, and organizationally weak will continue to overshadow their relationship with government and donors.

#### **IV. OBSERVATIONS AND CONCLUSIONS**

Cameroon's NGO sector is presently in a period of rapid change, reflecting the economic and political transitions underway in the society as a whole. Many new NGOs are being formed, their geographic and technical scope of activity is expanding, and the range of professional and technical skills at their command is also beginning to increase. Interest in the role of NGOs as agents of development is now apparent even in areas of the country which historically had less tradition of this form of organization for service delivery.

Donors are channeling an increasing proportion of development assistance through NGOs, and this is one factor stimulating rapid growth within the sector. The budgetary crisis faced by government agencies and parastatals is another reason for the growing importance of NGOs in Cameroon. In some cases, individuals are leaving government service and establishing new NGOs, and university graduates who formerly would have been absorbed into the civil service are also seeking a career in the NGO sector.

In sum, NGOs are becoming a significant factor in Cameroon's development plans. Donors are paying more attention to their role, and by all accounts the people of Cameroon are also expecting them to fill some of the gap left by government. The issue examined by this report is, what are the problems and opportunities for NGOs seeking to improve environmental awareness and policy advocacy in Cameroon?

##### **Constraints to an Expanded Environmental Role for Cameroonian NGOs**

The trends mentioned above have several positive implications: there are many new opportunities for environmental initiatives, and many more channels for carrying these out. NGOs have the potential to generate greater participation by local resource users in these initiatives, and to respond quickly and cost-effectively to new needs and issues.

At the same time, several factors inhibit a more ambitious agenda for Cameroonian NGOs despite their rapid increase in number. Some of these observations relate specifically to activities in the NRM or environmental field, but mostly they pertain to Cameroonian NGOs in general. In both cases, these problems need to be taken into account in designing environmental activities to be implemented by NGOs. These include:

- A reluctance on the part of government to accept NGOs as a full-fledged partner in national development;
- Fears that NGOs are prone to politicization;
- Technical, staffing, management, and funding limitations;

- An image or credibility problem due to poor performance or lack of accountability on the part of some organizations;
- Regional differences with regard to colonial and post-colonial experience of governance and local initiative;
- An ambiguous legal framework, and excessive government discretionary power over NGO activities; and
- Confusion between bona fide NGOs and consulting firms which sometimes represent themselves as "NGOs."

These issues are not unique to Cameroon. Indeed, many sub-Saharan African societies are experiencing similar pressures and tensions as they move toward multiparty political systems and begin to scale down the previously all-encompassing role of government. In some cases, African NGOs are understood to represent ethnic or regional subgroups, a perception which governments sometimes cite when resisting expanded roles for NGOs. Governmental desire to regulate or "coordinate" NGOs, not to mention the funds they receive from external donors, can represent another source of tensions and pressures, pointing to an underlying competition for scarce development resources.

Yet it is clear that across the continent, there is a distinct trend toward broadening the development role of NGOs at the same time that government's role is being streamlined. Whether by design or by default, African governments are in the process of redefining their role and shedding responsibilities in one sector after another. And at the same time, African civil society is asserting itself in new ways, manifested by a widening scope for individual expression and freedom of association. The dynamism of the African NGO community represents an integral part of this trend.

On the other hand, it is not necessarily the optimum role for NGOs to attempt to fill all gaps left by central government retrenchment. In the environmental arena, for example, it may be more important in some cases for NGOs to play a robust advocacy and "watchdog" role than to take on tasks which in the past would have been assumed to be public sector responsibilities. In addition, it should be kept in mind that the for-profit sector may often be a more appropriate mechanism for delivery of certain kinds of services. Striking the right balance between the respective roles of central government and local authorities, between the private sector and NGOs, is a crucial task in the process of political and social transformation within African nations.

In Cameroon, the process of governmental streamlining has yet to evolve a coherent strategy for decentralization; this situation is somewhat more advanced in the case of Uganda, in contrast. Government agencies in Yaoundé may be acutely aware of their inability to carry out all of the responsibilities within their existing mandate, and in some cases have begun to espouse new principles such as "local participation." At the same time, decentralization rhetoric

does not always seem to be matched by realistic plans for implementation. In some cases, this has given rise to cynicism among observers as to the likely impact of proposed reforms.

Within the forestry sector, for example, there is widespread skepticism concerning the ability of the government to actually implement many of the reforms proposed in new legislation presently being drafted. What is more, the idea that NGOs should play a key role in forest management is not yet one that many government officials are prepared to accept, while at the same time these officials acknowledge that government will play a smaller role in the future than it did in the past. The conceptual and practical contradictions of this stance pose a serious problem at a time when Cameroon faces acute environmental challenges, a situation which undermines the country's ability to mobilize effectively to respond to these challenges.

### **Needs of Cameroonian NGOs in the Environmental Sector**

This report identifies four categories of needs to be addressed as part of a strategy for Cameroonian NGOs to become more directly engaged within the environmental sector, which would be necessary in order for them to fulfill the environmental awareness and advocacy roles identified by the USAID Mission in planning for CAMPER.

It should also be noted that these roles are not necessarily dependent upon the proposed CAMPER project; indeed, NGO activities would be all the more important were USAID unable to launch a major project of the kind presently envisioned. The key issue would then become how to provide appropriate and practical support to NGOs, at a time when Cameroon's environmental needs are escalating just as USAID's program is scaling down. These issues are addressed below, within four categories: expansion of technical capacity; clarification of legal context and institutional identity; improved coordination for NGO membership bodies; and improving financial stability and long-range strategic planning.

### **Expanding Technical Capacity**

Despite the rapid growth within the Cameroonian NGO sector, few organizations can presently mobilize a wide range of NRM skills or expertise in environmental disciplines. On the other hand, a number of groups have been involved in implementing selected natural resource activities such as agroforestry, and have received technical training as well as management support from a variety of external sources, including the USAID PVO-NGO NRMS project. To some extent, a demonstration effect arises from the presence of NRM programs of major international NGOs such as CARE, and this may be a factor in stimulating the interest of Cameroonian NGOs in working within this field. The international NGOs also employ a cadre of experienced staff who represent a potential recruitment pool for local organizations, another important reality of the NGO community.

However, it is not yet clear that most Cameroonian NGOs are in a position to benefit from the rapid developments taking place within the field of natural resource management across sub-Saharan Africa. This importance of this point is underscored by the wide range of

ecological systems found within the country, ranging from lowland humid forest to montane systems to arid Sahelian zones. In Cameroon, the PVO-NGO NRMS project organized regional groupings by geo-ecological zones, a useful first step in developing a more specialized NRM expertise within the country.

The USAID Bureau for Africa has recognized the dynamism and complexity of the NRM field, and sponsors an annual gathering in Washington of its NRM collaborators to exchange information, and to keep the community abreast of recent research results and new program initiatives. Most Cameroonian NGOs at present have little access to the kind of information presented in such fora. For this reason, the networking function performed by the PVO-NGO NRMS project has been very important, serving to some extent as a conduit for recent thinking and lessons of experience from other countries, for instance on such topics as integrated conservation and development projects. In pedagogical and technical terms, the effectiveness of this form of information flow has not been evaluated, and in any case only a modest number of Cameroonian NGOs have participated to date.

Nevertheless, it is important for these NGOs to remain in contact with the broader NRM and environmental communities, and to maintain a sense that their work in these fields is not isolated, but is part of an emerging and rapidly evolving discipline to which they have much to offer. It should also be emphasized that information flow in both directions is important. The NGO community in Cameroon, as well as the broader NRM community, would benefit from a mechanism by which lessons learned and local innovations could "trickle up," from the level of field activities to the level of national institutions, and then to NRM practitioners beyond the borders of Cameroon.

### **Clarifying the Legal Context and Institutional Identity**

NGOs in Cameroon span a wide range; one finds well-regarded and professionally managed service organizations, but also there are many tiny consulting firms calling themselves NGOs, the so-called "briefcase NGOs." Much of the credibility problem presently faced by Cameroonian NGOs stems from negative perceptions of this latter group, which is often perceived as opportunistic and lacking in accountability. Because there is as yet not a set of established criteria by which NGOs can be defined, almost any form of organization is able at present to use this appellation. The existing law on associations provides little guidance which could clarify matters.

For their part, some donor agencies have begun to distinguish between NGOs and grassroots organizations, often imputing greater accountability and merit to the latter than to the former. However, this distinction is hardly airtight; it is as problematic to assume that all grassroots organizations are deserving as it is to negatively stereotype all NGOs. In organizational terms, the important criteria revolve around issues of membership, mandate, accountability, and performance. In comparison with these factors, the question of operational level or geographic scope of operations (i.e., "national NGO" or "grassroots organization") is a less useful indicator of institutional capacity or reliability.

Clearer guidelines on registration of NGOs and other not-for-profit associations could improve the situation, for example, by distinguishing service delivery or membership organizations, which have a charitable mission, from profit-oriented consulting firms. The for-profit sector should begin to compete for business through contracting appropriate types of operations from donors and development projects, while the not-for-profit sector concentrates on development activities less suited to contracting.

Both forms of organization have an important role to play, especially as Cameroon's private sector begins to account for a growing proportion of national output. It is important to be able to properly identify and categorize institutions, not least so that would-be sources of funding can establish contractual and reporting procedures appropriate to each case.

### **Improved Coordination for NGO Membership Bodies**

As Cameroon's NGO community expands, gains experience, and becomes more stable, one may expect to see the emergence of specialized organizations or bodies which provide services to NGOs or which represent their interests to government, to donor agencies, and to the public. The nascent representative institutions such as COPAD (formed in 1990) and FONGEC (formed in 1991) exercise limited roles, and appear not to be taken very seriously at present, even by some of the member NGOs.

Such a situation can easily prolong itself in a kind of self-fulfilling prophecy: because the coordinating NGO bodies have an ineffectual image, little is expected of them, and hence, they are offered few opportunities to accomplish meaningful tasks. One way to move away from this impasse could be to identify specific and appropriate functions for these institutions and to challenge them to carry them out.

Another complicating factor in the emergence of Cameroon's NGO sector is the role of donor-initiated and donor-funded projects such as PVO-NGO NRMS or Africa 2000. At present, confusion and occasional frustration are expressed by Cameroonian NGOs who do not fully understand the roles of these "umbrella" projects, nor how they are meant to relate to other NGOs and donors. Much of this confusion revolves around the functions these bodies are meant to serve. Are they sources of technical assistance and training for indigenous NGOs? Are they channels for donor funding? Are they competitors for donor funding? Are they "coordinators" of NGO activities? Are they competitors to membership bodies such as COPAD? Do they represent NGOs in the eyes of government? Should NGOs have a say in how these umbrella projects are run, or should the relationship remain essentially one-way?

From the perspective of donor agencies with limited staff resources, the utility of umbrella NGOs is beyond dispute. As a practical matter, there may be no other way for the larger agencies to relate to and support a sizable and growing number of Cameroonian NGOs. Yet it is also clear that continuing confusion over the questions mentioned above clouds the relationship between Cameroonian NGOs and donors at present.

This once again presents a situation in which clearer definitions and guidelines about roles, procedures, lines of communication, and accountability, could be quite useful without sacrificing the obvious advantages of the umbrella mechanism. Cameroonian NGOs consistently express a desire to have more direct contact with the major donors, including USAID, even if such contact is not for the purpose of soliciting funding. A combination of structured fora with a clearly demarcated agenda (i.e., meeting to discuss issues other than funding) as well as better use of apex organizations could prove beneficial.

### **Improving Financial Stability and Long-Range Strategic Planning**

For the long term, it will be important for Cameroonian NGOs to develop a capacity to raise funds locally, and to become institutionally accountable to a local membership and to financial contributors. This is probably the truest test of sustainability, and represents a critical stage in the development of a robust private and voluntary sector.

In the near term, however, it is perhaps unavoidable that the majority of Cameroonian NGOs will continue to be heavily dependent upon access to external resources. As a result, the financial dimension of NGO - donor relationships presently overshadows almost everything else, a condition which is likely to persist for some time.

In discussing the future directions these relationships will take, it is important to try to isolate financing from other issues, however, and not to assume that a single mechanism or initiative will be beneficial to every aspect of NGO - donor interactions. For example, the same umbrella project which provides technical assistance and training to NGOs may not always be the best channel for financing the activities of those NGOs.

The act of soliciting funding from a donor almost invariably takes on aspects of competitiveness (vis-a-vis other applicants for a limited pool of resources) or of supplication (vis-a-vis those with the power to award grants or contracts). In both instances, relationships colored by such nuances are arguably not the ideal context in which to provide other important services such as management support, technical training, or other forms of institutional assistance which are badly needed by Cameroonian NGOs. This can lead to false expectations, frustrations, and jealousies -- a situation which is readily apparent among Cameroonian NGOs now working in natural resources management. Some of these problems might be avoided by giving more thought in the design of umbrella projects to both the long and short term needs of the participating NGOs, and by specific measures to avoid blurring of functions and services which should remain distinct.

NGOs will at the same time need to begin to develop a capacity to formulate their own long-range strategic plans, based upon a clear understanding of each organization's fundamental purpose: what problem is it addressing, and how? Greater management accountability is needed, in terms of stewardship of the organization's resources (funds, vehicles, staff time, etc.) as well as accountability for progress toward the organization's goals. Finally, development of a local funding base is needed in order to introduce a measure of financial stability. The fact that this

will also introduce an added element of local accountability is yet another benefit of such an approach, however difficult this may be to bring about.

The observations discussed above are amplified in the following list of recommendations arising from the technical, institutional, sectoral, and financial needs of Cameroonian NGOs in the environmental sector.

## **V. RECOMMENDATIONS**

### **Clarification of NGO Support Functions**

Where possible, technical assistance to Cameroonian NGOs should be handled separately from funding of NGO activities. Some Cameroonian NGOs presently are confused about the terms under which they relate to USAID and its projects such as PVO-NGO NRMS. The lack of a distinction between technical assistance for institution strengthening and financing for discrete NGO field activities is responsible for at least some of this confusion. A better system would separate these functions, so that NGO interactions with USAID would be channeled into distinct offices or agencies according to the type of activity: application for funding, participation in a training course, etc.

Alternatively, operating different "windows" within a single umbrella project might help to alleviate this problem to some extent. However, staffing constraints within small projects such as PVO-NGO NRMS may make it impractical to segregate functions within a single unit.

### **Cameroon Environmental Endowment**

USAID/Yaoundé should consider using local currency funds to establish an environmental endowment which in turn would work directly with Cameroonian NGOs to support environmental activities throughout the country. This would enable USAID to make a positive and long-term impact in this sector regardless of the status of the proposed CAMPER project. It would also impose a lower management and oversight requirement upon the Mission, in comparison with a conventional USAID project. Guidelines are now being prepared by AID/W which would facilitate the process of establishing an environmental endowment in Cameroon.

### **Support for Cameroon NEAP**

USAID/Yaoundé should continue its involvement in the development of the National Environmental Action Plan (NEAP), and use its influence with other donors and with the Government to ensure that the NEAP process becomes as participatory as possible. USAID experience with NEAPs elsewhere in Africa illustrates the benefits of a substantive engagement early in the NEAP process.

The present course of the Cameroon NEAP appears likely to result in less NGO and community participation than is desirable, which could undermine future efforts to decentralize resource management responsibilities away from central government and toward the local level. USAID can help to ensure that the NEAP process gives more attention to building constituencies of NGOs and local communities who feel a sense of ownership in the implementation of specific reforms and environmental activities identified by the NEAP.

## **NGO - Donor Forum**

USAID/Yaoundé should also consider using its good offices to initiate an environmental forum or roundtable for NGO - donor coordination within Cameroon. The relationships between Cameroonian NGOs and donors are presently dominated by the topic of funding, yet some NGOs express a need for a context in which to meet with donors and with each other, to discuss a broader range of issues and ideas. An NGO forum specific to the environment could be a useful channel for dialogue on issues other than funding, and could also represent another channel for USAID to exercise influence in the environmental sector in the absence of a full-fledged project such as CAMPER.

## **Environmental Awareness Campaign**

USAID should support an environmental awareness campaign, or "leverage" one through other donors currently active in Cameroon. Certain elements of such a campaign are already being carried out in a more or less piecemeal manner. The impact of these needs to be assessed, so that the most successful programs can be expanded to provide national coverage. Some of these could eventually be supported by the environmental endowment, proposed above.

Several specific components of an environmental awareness campaign can be identified already:

- Implement on a pilot basis the national environmental awareness program presently being designed by WWF, and ensure that it is adequately coordinated with other environmental awareness efforts.
- Strengthen the role of the private sector, for example by encouraging the Chamber of Commerce to promote environmental messages and environmentally-oriented advertising by its members.
- Expand to nation-wide coverage the secondary school environmental curriculum presently produced by Living Earth in Buea, and extend it to other age groups as well.

## **ANNEX A. SCOPE OF WORK**

### **Assessment of PVO/NGO Capability in Influencing Environmental Policy in Cameroon**

#### **Purpose**

The purpose of this activity is to conduct an assessment of the effectiveness of private voluntary organizations (PVO) and non-governmental organizations (NGO) in influencing environmental policy in Cameroon. The study will focus on the constraints and opportunities

for PVO/NGO participation in policy advocacy.

### Methodology and Workplan

WRI's Center will be responsible for this assessment activity and for delivering to BSP a full report synthesizing the team's findings. The WRI team will work closely with appropriate BSP and AID staff in Washington and Cameroon for direction and guidance in carrying out the proposed activity.

The proposed assessment of PVOs and NGOs will incorporate the following components and activities:

- (1) Reviewing the current state (structure, technical and managerial capability, programs, funding sources) and potential of key indigenous NGOs to contribute to sustainable resource management in Cameroon;
- (2) Identifying priority areas for possible support to indigenous NGOs/PVOs (particularly in the areas of policy advocacy and environmental awareness) along with appropriate mechanisms for providing such support;
- (3) Identifying constraints to indigenous NGO/PVO participation in natural resource management and how these might be addressed;
- (4) Reviewing current or proposed programs in Cameroon of international NGOs in natural resource management; and,
- (5) Identifying priority areas for possible support to international conservation NGOs or other organizations through cooperative agreements (i.e., for environmental education, biodiversity research, integrated park/reserve management).

### **ANNEX B. ORGANIZATIONS AND PERSONS CONTACTED**

*ACT* Chumbon Patrick

*Association Pour la Défense des Droits de l'Homme et des Libertés* Abdoulaye Mazou

*Professional Womens Association* Pauline Biyong

*CARE International - Cameroon* Michel Verret

*CIPCRE* Jean Blaise Kemogne.

*DETMAC Associates* Christopher Atang

*E & E Consultants* Enoh Tanjong

*Heifer Project International (HPI)* Moppoi Nuwanyakpa

*INADES Formation Cameroon* Jonas Mva Mva

*JANA International* Jean Aubé

*Living Earth* Sammy Lyonga

*Ministry of Environment and Forestry* Joseph Besong

*Missouri Botanical Garden* Porter Lowry II.

*Population Services International (PSI)* Tim Manchester

*PRISERI* M. Ngwashiri

*PVO-NGO NRMS Project* Ada Ndeso-Atanga

*SAILD* Bernard Ndjonga

*SASH* Kevin Gumne; Mzeka Paul

*Tribus Sans Frontières* M. Onambele

*UNDP - Africa 2000* Timothy Besingi

*United Nations Sudano-Sahelian Office (UNSO)/NEAP Secretariat* Joachim Bendow

*USAID Yaoundé* Ronald Harvey; John McMahon; Elzadia Washington; M. Ambe; Tom Crawford; Daniel Moore; Derek Singer

*WWF - Cameroon* Steve Gartlan; Manasseh Ngome

*World Conservation International (WCI)* James (Buddy) Powell

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