

# Cameroon

## The Indigenous Forest Peoples and Protected Areas in Cameroon:



**A review of Cameroon's implementation of the  
CBD Programme of Work  
on Protected Areas**

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Centre for Environment and Development

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## I The Indigenous forest peoples and protected areas in Cameroon

Indigenous forest peoples in Cameroon, pejoratively called 'Pygmies', are divided into three major ethnic groups. The first and largest is the Baka. This group numbers close to 40,000<sup>1</sup> people, occupies about 75,000 km<sup>2</sup> and is situated to the south east of the country. The second group, the Bagyeli (which some authors wrongly mistake for the Bakola<sup>2</sup>), numbers about 3,700 people and occupies about 12,000 km<sup>2</sup> in the southern part of the coastal region, more precisely in the Subdivisions of Akom II, Campo Bipindi, Kribi and Lolodorf. The third group, the Bedzang, with less than a thousand people, lives to the north-west of Mbam in the region of Ngambe-Tikar<sup>3</sup>. The Pygmies probably account for about 0.4% of the entire population of Cameroon.

The Pygmies are men and women of the forest *par excellence*, whose existence is organized around the forest and its resources. They greatly depend on the forest from where they obtain the essential products needed for their subsistence (honey, fruits, wild yams, caterpillars, snails etc). They thus consider the forest as their 'bread basket'. The wellbeing of Pygmies is fundamentally dependent on life in the forest. Not only does it provide the means of livelihood, but it is also a source of peace and security for them.

While Pygmies are traditionally hunters-gatherers, their lifestyle is undergoing changes because of the various forms of pressure exerted on them and their milieu. Agriculture is becoming a more and more important activity. Some sources rank it second among the activities performed by the Pygmies after hunting. These changes in the local economies of the Pygmies are some of the indicators of the extent to which they have been sedentarized.

According to the results of an investigation conducted by Loung from 1983 to 1991 and cited by Bigombe Logo<sup>4</sup> there are probably four major categories of Pygmy occupations today:

- traditional hunter-gatherers (6% of the Pygmy population);
- hunters-gatherers-farmers (38%);
- farmers-hunters-gatherers (35%); and
- farmers-hunters (21%).

This investigation confirms that the economy of the Pygmy population is still centred around the forest and its resources through hunting, fishing and gathering. The forest remains the major provider of the resources needed for subsistence. However, gradual adoption of agriculture is part of a strategy to fight for survival. The homes that practice it are almost self sufficient in terms of food and they acquire a certain degree of autonomy vis-à-vis their Bantu neighbours as opposed to those homes that may be considered as purely forest dependent.

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<sup>1</sup> Very approximate figures based on the census of Father Dethemmes in the 1970s. It is urgent that this demographic data is updated.

<sup>2</sup> Vallois, 1949 and Dikoumé 1997. It should be stated here that in the Bipindi and Akom II areas, the Pygmy populations identify themselves as being Bagyeli, and not Bakola. It is believed that while there are many similarities between them, they speak a language slightly different to that of the Bakola, which are found especially in the Lolodorf Subdivision. This assertion is shared by Biesbrouck (1999), who conducted several field investigations with the Bagyeli of Bipindi.

<sup>3</sup> The Bedzang living in the Savannah zone may be of Baka origin, as testified by the reflux of the latter towards the South.

<sup>4</sup> Patrice Bigombe Logo 'Les Pygmées et les programmes de développement au Cameroun, repenser les approches et responsabiliser les pygmées' in *Mutations*, 17 August 2004.

Although these changes contribute to the improvement of food security, they are also accompanied by a number of social changes. Male/female relationships are thus modified, and this is quite often to the detriment of women, who become more dependent on men for the clearing of their farms, and gradually lose the social means of power that they traditionally exercise over men<sup>5</sup>.

Traditional hunters-gatherers are victims of the depletion of forest resources as a result of the exploitation, to which these resources are subjected, and the restriction or ignorance of their right of access to resources or their cultural identity.

We had earlier emphasized that there are no disaggregated data on the socio-economic situation of the Pygmy population. Those at our disposal are approximate, or are based on Judgment that are at times very subjective and their reliability is questionable.

Even in the absence of reliable data and indicators, it is easy to recognize that the development situation of Pygmies in Cameroon is a matter for serious concern. They constitute the weakest and the most vulnerable group of Cameroonian society. Their poverty may be evaluated on the following four plains: financial, cultural, access to basic social services and respect for their human individual and collective rights.

At the financial/material level, it is very difficult to estimate the income levels of the Pygmy population. Their essential income is derived from marketing of agricultural and/or forest products (game, fish and other non timber forest products). Their harvests hardly suffice to guarantee self-sufficiency as the marketing of forest products, especially those from hunting, is now prohibited. Some Pygmies also work in the plantations of their Bantu neighbours or even on forest exploitation sites. In most cases, their contracts remain precarious and their earnings are always insufficient in relation to the magnitude of their needs. The average income of the Pygmies is less than one-third of the income of the other Cameroonians that live in the same regions.

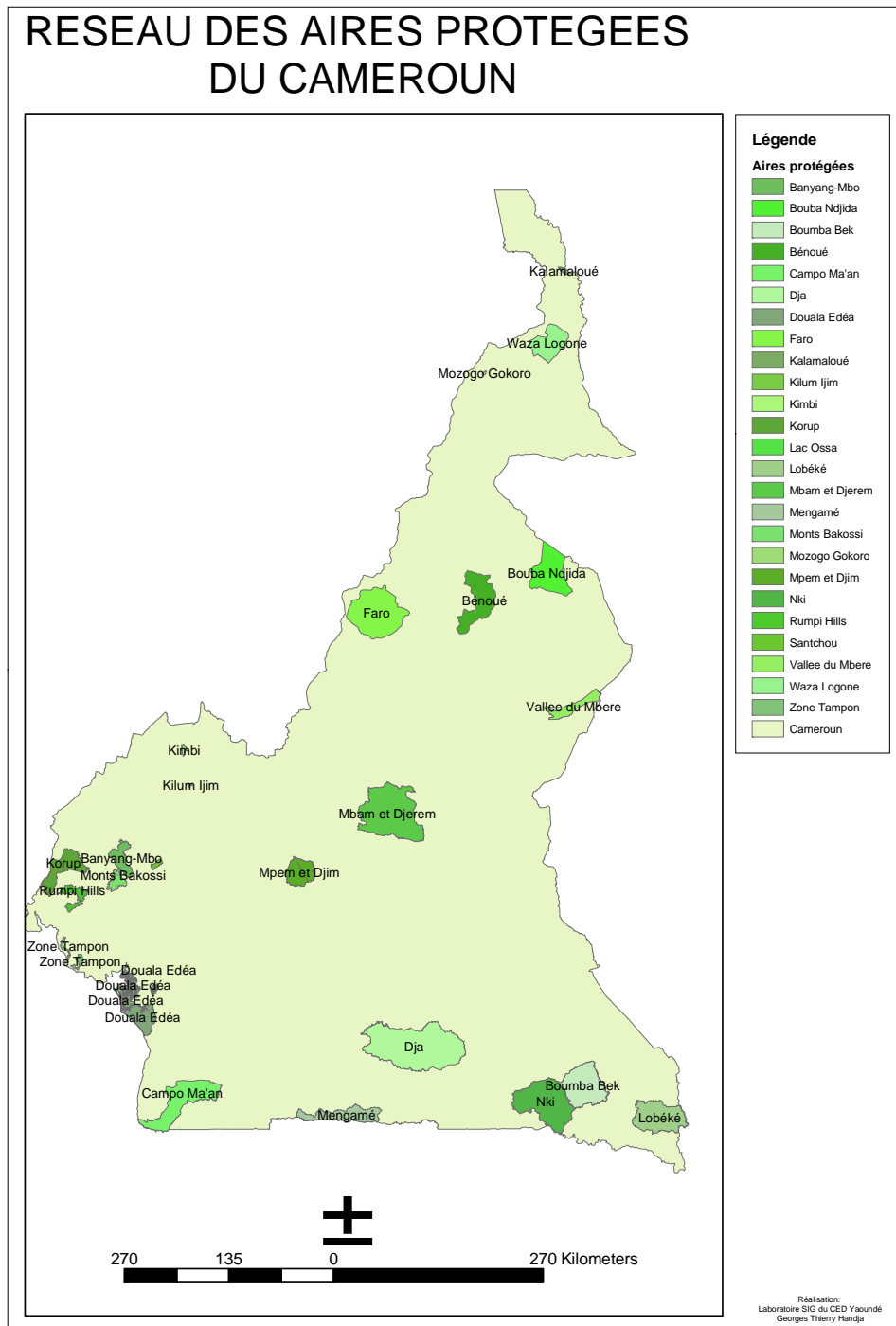
At the cultural level, the issue of socio-economic development of the Pygmies arises with particular reference to the non-recognition and/or non-respect of their cultural identity. Expressions such as 'under developed,' 'backward,' 'primitive' and even worse terms are often used to refer to these people. These negative stereotypes, and discrimination, are additional to the dispossession of their ancestral lands and natural resources in the interests of large-scale forest exploiters, agro-industrial companies and conservation organizations. This leads to their impoverishment and threatens their culture and their survival as a people. In fact, Pygmies are excluded from participating in the benefits of forest exploitation and biodiversity conservation of the areas situated in their traditional territories<sup>6</sup>.

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<sup>5</sup>Baka women's control over men is exercised through rites performed by the former in order to procure luck for the latter in their hunting activities. See Abéga (1998) on this subject.

<sup>6</sup> Forestry laws in Cameroon provide for a mechanism of sharing the fruits of large-scale forest exploitation between the State, decentralised local authorities and local communities. It happens that most local communities scarcely have access to these benefits, and even when they do, the Pygmies are systematically denied their share. They almost never participate in the committees in charge of managing these resources and scarcely receive any benefits. The same holds for fallouts of game hunting in the so-called protected areas.

## II Implementation of activities of the CBD Programme of Work on Protected Areas relevant to the forest Indigenous Peoples



The map above shows the network of protected areas in Cameroon. Of all protected areas of the country, six located in the southern part overlap with indigenous forest peoples' ancestral lands. These protected areas were established without the consent and the participation of the people. The establishment and the management of protected areas have contributed dramatically to the impoverishment of indigenous forest peoples in Cameroon as in many other countries of the world.<sup>7</sup>

<sup>7</sup> Nelson, J and L Hossack (eds.) (2003) *Indigenous peoples and protected areas in Africa – From principles to practice*. FPP, Moreton-in-Marsh.

Cameroon ratified the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD) on 14 June 1992. This brief report analyses the extent to which the CBD Programme of Work on Protected Areas (PoWPA), adopted by COP7 of the CBD in 2004, has been implemented by Cameroon in respect of the forest indigenous peoples and the six national parks that overlap their ancestral territories.

Decision VII.28 (on Protected Areas) of COP7:

23. 'Recalls the obligations of the Parties towards indigenous and local communities in accordance with article 8(j) and related provisions and notes that the establishment, management and planning of protected areas should take place with the **full and effective participation of, and full respect for the rights of,** indigenous and local communities consistent with national law and applicable international obligations (emphasis added);

The Programme of Work is composed of four elements:

1. Direct actions for planning, selecting, establishing, strengthening, and managing, protected area systems and sites.
2. Governance, Participation, Equity and Benefit Sharing
3. To provide an enabling policy, institutional and socio-economic environment for protected areas
4. Standards, assessments, and monitoring

Under element 2, Goal 2.2 and its related Target, focus on indigenous peoples as follows:

**Goal 2.2** To enhance and secure involvement of indigenous and local communities and relevant stakeholders.

**Target:** Full and effective participation by 2008, of indigenous and local communities, in full respect of their rights and recognition of their responsibilities, consistent with national law and applicable international obligations, and the participation of relevant stakeholders, in the management of existing, and the establishment of new, protected areas.

However, many other 'suggested activities' of obvious relevance to indigenous peoples were also included in the Programme of Work.<sup>8</sup> This section of the report analyses the implementation of specific activities contained in the four elements of the Programme of Work that we consider most relevant to indigenous peoples.

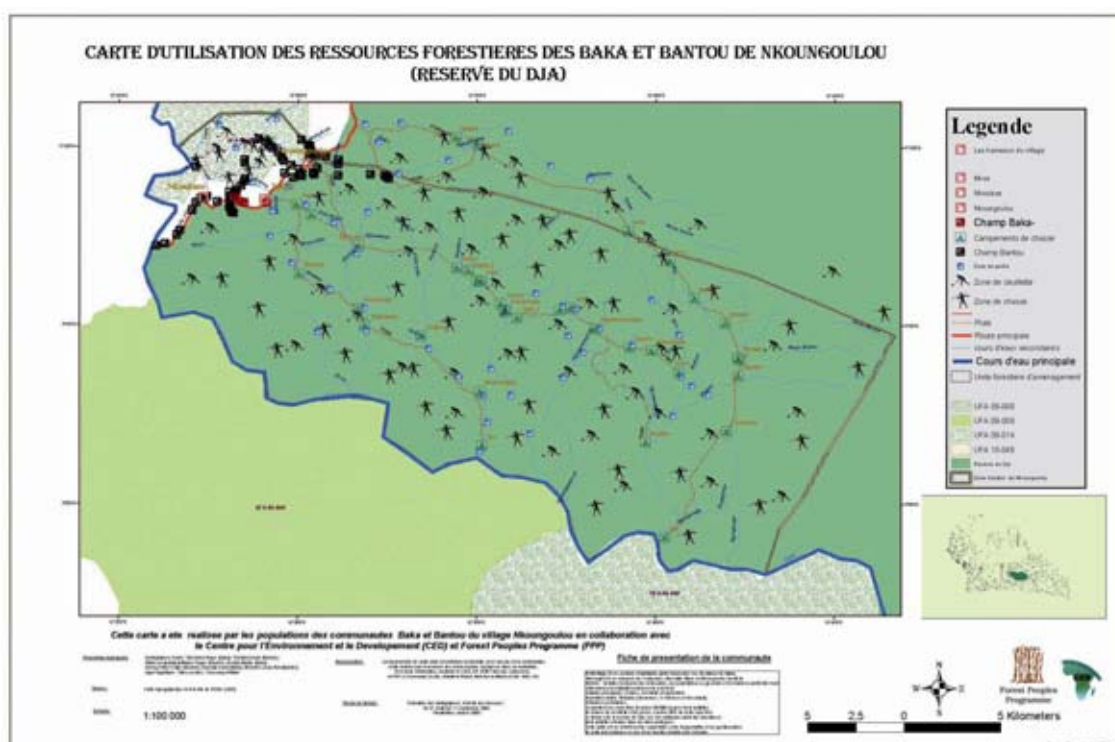
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[http://www.forestpeoples.org/documents/conservation/bases/p\\_to\\_p\\_project\\_base.shtml#book](http://www.forestpeoples.org/documents/conservation/bases/p_to_p_project_base.shtml#book) and, Tchoumba B, J Nelson et al (2006) *Protecting and encouraging customary use of biological resources by the Baka in the west of the Dja Biosphere Reserve: Contribution to the implementation of Article 10(c) of the Convention on Biological Diversity*. FPP, Moreton-in-Marsh.

<sup>8</sup> For details see: Griffiths, T., Lasimbang, J and Ferrari, M, 2004, *The CBD COP-7 and Related Conferences/Meetings, Kuala Lumpur, 6-20 February 2004*. International Indigenous Forum on Biodiversity: Summary Report on COP 7 – Protected Areas. Available at [www.forestpeoples.org](http://www.forestpeoples.org)

#### **Activity 1.1.4 National level reviews of conservation methods with indigenous participation**

To our knowledge there has not been any national level review of existing and potential forms of conservation and there have been no consultations with or participation on the part of the forest indigenous in respect of such a process. However, there has been some consultation of indigenous peoples at individual protected areas such as Campo Ma'an national park. This has led to the recognition of Bagyeli rights in relation to their access and use of the park. The same process is under way in other park in the southeast namely the Boumba Bek and Nki national park. Around Dja national park, consultations have been led by national NGOs including CED, however, the results of these consultations are not formally taken into consideration in the management plan that has recently been approved by national authorities. Although there are some discussions and site level, it crucial to review conservation methods at national level with an appropriate participation of indigenous peoples in order to comply with the element 2 of the work programme on protected areas.



Map created by the communities with the support of CED technical staff shows a tight relationship between the Baka and Bantu people and the forest and its resources in the Dja Reserve

#### **Activity 1.5.6 Taking sustainable customary resource use by indigenous communities into account**

All local communities face restrictions against the use of forests lying within the park. Forest indigenous peoples are particularly affected due to their reliance on hunting and gathering. The exception here is Campo Ma'an national park where Bagyeli rights to access and use the park according to their traditional lifestyle were recognized in the government forest management plan. However it is still unclear how these provisions have been implemented in an area of such high commercial poaching pressure overlapping Bagyeli traditional lands. Further review is required. Around Boumba-Bek and Nki National Parks in the southeast government *conservateurs* have joined with communities and NGOs to document and protect ancestral lands of Baka, and their rights, including especially those lying within the national park itself.

Further work is required to resolve some of the conservation-community conflicts that have so far been identified.

In general in Cameroon, forest indigenous peoples are considered to be the original inhabitants of many parts of the equatorial forest. They traditionally exist by hunting and gathering, live in small groups, and lead a semi-nomadic forest-based life. Their presence in Cameroon's forests is well-recorded and certainly precolonial. In many places where Baka live it is generally accepted by other local communities that their ancestors arrived to find Baka already there.

Cameroon law protects customary use of forests by communities including hunting and gathering – even in logging concessions – but maintaining such access is still up to government discretion, since competing claims for forests to secure timber and minerals, or to enable the operation of commercial safaris, can, with government backing, override local and indigenous communities' rights. In most cases where there is a conflict with these outside forces, traditional sustainable customary resource use by indigenous communities is ignored, and certainly suppressed by new regulations overriding traditional management rules. When community use is taken into account in forest management plans it is usually due to its perception as a threat; to park integrity, to protected species; to safari quotas; to logging workers, and; to logging plans targeting key economic species like Moabi and Sapelli trees, which also underpin indigenous forest community subsistence everywhere it is found.

#### ***Activity 2.1.1 Assessments of social, economic and cultural costs and benefits to indigenous people***

There has been no recent assessment by government of the economic and socio-cultural costs and benefits of protected areas for forest indigenous communities. There are rather socio-economic studies to assess the level of pressure exerted by indigenous communities on biological diversity of protected areas. However, it is worth acknowledging that there are efforts been made at local level to assess the social, economic and cultural costs and benefits of the establishment of protected areas on indigenous communities, including through the integration of community resource use mapping data in planning.

World Bank funding to the forest and environment sector led to some social assessment and the publication of two Indigenous Peoples Development Plans (IPDPs) that specifically target the special needs of indigenous communities in Cameroon, since the potential impacts of World Bank funding on them were widely recognised. However after several years of theoretical implementation, no significant IPDP actions have taken place to address the endemic community-protected area conflicts that World Bank funding continues to exacerbate in Cameroon.

#### ***Activities 2.1.2 & 2.2.4 Community conserved areas***

There are frameworks in place for community forest and community hunting zones. To date, only three Baka communities have gone through the long and complicated process of acquiring a community forest. There is no specific provision for community conserved areas although community forest can be managed as such.

#### ***Activity 2.1.4 Use of social and economic benefits for poverty reduction***

Indigenous communities, who are recognised by Cameroon's Poverty Reduction Strategy Paper (PRSP), are amongst the poorest groups in Cameroon, yet they receive almost no benefits from protected areas in and around their traditional areas. Through restrictions on their forest access and increased repression and enforcement of protected species legislation, indigenous hunter-gatherers in particular are becoming poorer as a result of the establishment of protected areas.

National legislation banning all use inside protected areas – even for non-protected species, and even for subsistence – combined with significant increased investment in ecoguard systems by overseas donors, has led everywhere to increased activities by paramilitary forest guards. This has resulted in well-documented cases of abuse of the rights of indigenous peoples, and encouragement by conservation projects of a general ‘stop and search mentality’ resulting in increased tensions between protected areas and indigenous communities upon them for their subsistence.

Efforts to establish benefit-sharing mechanisms with indigenous communities, including co-managed community wildlife zones around protected areas (eg COVAREFs in Jengi project) have failed to enable adequate participation by indigenous communities like Baka, resulting in dominance by local communities and especially urban elites who have captured virtually all of the benefits so far generated. The same problem appears with the potential sharing of park entrance and use fees which are still not available to indigenous communities.

### **Activities 2.2.1 & 2.1.5 *Participation of indigenous communities in protected areas management in recognition of their rights***

In Cameroon all untitled and unused land belongs to the State. Under national law communities have always retained usufruct rights to develop<sup>9</sup> land. This usually applies to lands for agricultural production. Cameroon's ratification of the CBD in 1992 helped establish a legal framework further protecting communities' customary use of forests that was subsequently integrated into the 1994 Cameroon Forestry Law protecting community usufruct rights, for ‘personal’ use only, over all lands except those inside protected areas. Article 26 in particular echoes Article 10(c) of the convention by stating: *‘Classification of state forests must take into accounts the social environment of indigenous populations in order to protect their normal usage rights. These rights can be restricted if they contradict the objectives for the forests. If their rights are restricted, they should be compensated...’* Such provisions for participation also exist in the Environment, Wildlife and Fisheries laws. Despite this strong emphasis in principle and law, in practice in Cameroon there is a continuing lack of participation by local and indigenous communities in the development and implementation of forest management plans. This remains one of the barriers to the implementation of the CBD Programme of Work on Protected Areas.

In Cameroon government moves towards increasing participation of indigenous communities tend to arise through local community-linked processes in which government agencies are directly engaged. This pragmatic approach to the development of new management mechanisms is leading to increasing participation in some of the locations where indigenous forest communities live, but the experience is highly variable and without adequate statutory protection – there is no consistent approach to enabling their participation. Policy changes by government to mandate informed participation by communities in the development and agreement of protected area plans would help Cameroon meet its CBD commitments.

### **Activity 2.2.2 *Removing barriers to adequate participation***

The government of Cameroon has developed a forest and environment sectoral programme (PSFE<sup>10</sup>) that provides space for local participation in forest processes. One of the expected results of the PSFE is related to the participation of local actors and benefit sharing mechanism. Furthermore, in order to fulfil the World Bank Operational policy (OD 4.20), the Government of Cameroon developed an Indigenous Peoples Development plan (IPDP) to assure that PSFE

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<sup>9</sup> French: *mettre en valeur*

<sup>10</sup> The French acronym of the PFSE programme stands for ‘Programme Sectoriel Forêt Environnement’



respects the rights, dignity and culture of the indigenous people, offers them equal or better opportunities to participate in the benefits and achieves the development objective of the PSFE and 'assures that the living conditions of the rural population are sustainably improved through the sustainable management of forest ecosystems'.<sup>11</sup> Unfortunately, since the IPDP was adopted by the World Bank it has never been implemented and indigenous people take a very marginal part in decision making processes regarding forest management and biodiversity conservation.

#### **Activity 2.2.5 Resettlement of indigenous communities**

Although there has been restriction for forest indigenous people to access their ancestral land, due to the establishment of protected areas, there has never been official resettlement of indigenous peoples by government.

#### **Activity 3.2.1 Protected area capacity building**

No capacity-building needs assessments have been carried out by government with the forest indigenous peoples and no protected area capacity-building programmes have been established with their involvement.

#### **Activity 3.2.2 Traditional knowledge on protected area management**

Traditional knowledge and experiences on protected area management in accordance with Article 8(j) and Related Provisions is being documented by NGOs and other civil society organisations with the hope that they will be taken into consideration by government officials in the management of protected areas. Establishment of most protected areas in Cameroon was preceded by biophysical studies of the targeted areas with indigenous groups by conservation agencies including international conservation NGOs, but the benefits of this research were not shared with the indigenous communities concerned. Most protected areas, eg those in forest areas, still rely upon porters and guides from indigenous communities due to their extensive forest knowledge and skills, but these are not really validated by managers, since indigenous workers are usually employed on a temporary, casual basis, and almost always hold the lowest-level jobs. More work needs to be done to integrate their traditional knowledge and skills into management of protected areas on a long-term basis.

#### **Activity 3.5.2 Communication programmes to improve mutual understanding of science-based and indigenous knowledge amongst communities, policy makers and civil society**

In most of the protected areas, dialogue frameworks established to facilitate communication between stakeholders. However the participation of indigenous people is generally poor and they lack capacities to have a meaningful and informed participation. In recent years, efforts have been made by parks managers and international NGOs to improve communication between stakeholders of conservation, but these are new, local and many indigenous communities remain unconvinced that they are genuine. However joint documentation of traditional use areas by government agencies, NGOs and communities are underway around several protected areas, including Boumba Bek and Nki National Parks, and this shows the government's willingness to explore new options. But the law is still unclear, and this continues to hamper community understanding of their actual legal status in and around traditional lands

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<sup>11</sup> Indigenous People ('Pygmy') Development Plan for the Forest and Environment Sectoral Programme (PSFE)

converted into parks. Increased communication will be achieved by increased interaction between indigenous communities and conservation authorities through joint documentation and recognition of indigenous forest use.

**Activity 4.4.4 Collaborative research between scientists and indigenous communities**

There has been no encouragement or initiation of collaborative research between scientists and indigenous communities in accordance with Article 8(j) or 10(c) in connection with the establishment and the effective management of protected areas. Most research done with these communities has been at best extractive with little benefits to the people. The exception has been when communities have been responsible for the research, when they have been able to present their findings to authorities, and these findings have been the basis for decisions to protect their rights even within protected area boundaries, such as in Campo Ma'an National Park.

**III Key Obstacles to Implementation and How to Overcome them**

The key obstacles to effective implementation of the Programme of Work and some potential measures for overcoming them are summarised in the table below.

Obstacle	Potential Measures
Government and conservation organisations view indigenous and local communities as part of the problem, not part of the solution, in promoting conservation.	<p>New attitudes must be promoted at all levels of government to view communities as equal partners in development and conservation.</p> <p>Stronger mechanisms are needed for participation, including direct involvement of indigenous Forest people in project design and implementation and the administration of funds.</p>
Government agencies and international conservation organisations do not take into proper account the unique historical and cultural situation of indigenous Forest communities in the planning or implementation of protected area management. Government development approaches assume a homogeneous local community.	<p>Building on the numerous existing studies, government should develop and implement, in consultation with local communities and indigenous peoples, a targeted 'Forest and Protected Areas programme' that recognises and addresses peoples' needs, rights and culture, including:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Their unique historical land and resource rights in respect of their ancestral lands, with reference to international human rights law;</li> <li>• Their particular cultural and socio-economic needs in respect of forest resource use and access.</li> </ul>
The capacities of protected areas managers to deal with social issues and work with indigenous communities is limited	The government and international conservations NGOs should develop strong social programmes and build the capacities of protected areas managers on international human rights standards especially those related to indigenous peoples' rights.

Obstacle	Potential Measures
The work programme is not well known at site level by those in charge of daily management of protected areas	The work programme should be made known to all government agencies involved in the management of protected areas.

## Summary/Conclusion

There are over 50,000 indigenous forest peoples in Cameroon. Most are totally reliant upon the forests where they live; their culture and economy are intertwined with its fate. Huge areas of forest are required to sustain their communities. Most of the forests they have used for generations are also open to exploitation for timber and minerals. Forest exploitation, which removes goods forest peoples rely upon for their subsistence, has been countered in Cameroon through the establishment of parks and reserves. National legislation bars anyone from using forests inside parks. As a result indigenous forest peoples, and the local farming communities with whom they live, have become trapped between competing outside interests, and their access to forest is decreasing. This is making them poorer and more vulnerable, and their political and social marginalisation further hampers their participation in discussions about the long-term future of their forest.

Cameroon has ratified the CBD but so far there has been no integrated programme of activities aimed at helping the Government of Cameroon to enable fair, full and effective participation of indigenous forest peoples in protected areas. The government has supported the development of new agreements specifically protecting indigenous forest access inside some parks, but much needs to be done to develop collaboration with communities everywhere to ensure that they are able play their full and fair role in the management of those ancestral areas. Indigenous communities' traditional forest knowledge needs to be validated by conservation authorities, and employment rules reviewed.. Implementation of the CBD by the Government of Cameroon will be enhanced by a more systematic approach to enabling the participation of indigenous communities in forest planning and management. Capacity constraints within communities, their civil society supporters, and government agencies with little experience of this area suggests significant room for improvements through information and training, and through greater investment in dialogue and discussion with communities as part of the forest management process. A review of legislation covering forests, wildlife, land and environment should reveal areas of potential revision to eliminate gaps in the law that hamper protection of indigenous community forest rights, especially in and around protected areas. Undertaking these measures in a consistent way will help improve government implementation of Articles 8(j) and 10(c) in Cameroon.



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Cover photograph: Baka nomadic forest dwelling in their traditional territory, which now falls within the Dja National Park, Cameroon