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What do communities want?

A rapid assessment of local preferences for community-owned forest enterprise

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1. Background

The Community Rights Law of 2009 with Respect to Forestlands (CRL) provides the legal framework for community ownership, control and management of forest in Liberia. The intent of the law is to empower communities to participate in sustainable forest management. Two key objectives are to “define rights and responsibilities of communities to own, manage, use and benefit from forest resources¹” and “establish mechanisms to promote informed and representative community participation in matters related to Community Forest Resources²”. A key guiding principle is that forest resources must be regulated, protected, managed and developed so as to “sustain and optimize the potential yield of their economic, social and environmental benefits” and to “ensure the fair and equitable distribution of their economic, social and environmental benefits to members of society³”.

Under the CRL a community may enter into commercial contract with a third party to harvest timber or non-timber forest products from their forestland⁴ or to fully manage their forest resources in line with regulations and guidelines issued by the Forestry Development Authority (FDA)⁵. To exercise these rights, communities must first establish the required governance structures, develop constitution and by-laws to govern their activities, enter into a Community Forestry Management Agreement with the FDA and, develop a forest management plan⁶.

2. Introduction

Since the introduction of Community Forestry Management Agreements (CFMA) in Liberia, the FDA has approved 32 CFMAs covering more than 576,937 hectares. With approximately 100 CFMA applications under consideration, it is likely that CFMAs will cover more than 1 million hectares of forest by the end of 2018. This will likely make CFMAs the dominant forest management regime by the end of the year.

At least 10⁷ of the approved CFMAs covering 323,178 hectares are involved in commercial logging operations through third-party agreements with

logging companies. Approximately five communities with CFMAs covering a little over 4,500 hectares indicate conservation intent. However, no CFMA has made a firm decision to set aside its forest for conservation, and the remaining CFMAs have neither been allocated to logging companies nor designated as conservation CFMAs.

In late 2017 the Sustainable Development Institute (SDI) commissioned a rapid assessment to understand the preferred forest management approach among people in CFMA areas. The purpose of the study was to raise the profile of local people's perspectives on debates about forest use and management in Liberia, given the diverse stakeholder views for and against logging and, the conservation and commercialization of non-timber forest resources including bush meat on a large-scale. To understand local people's preferences, the key questions for the study sought to establish the preferred community-owned forest enterprises, what communities are already doing to pursue their preferred enterprise development and, what the main commercial enterprises in the study communities are.

3. Methodology

Two communities with approved CFMAs were purposely selected from the pool of approved CFMAs without an active logging operation. The communities selected for the assessment included Beyan Poye in Whorn, Margibi County and Barcauline in District No. 3, Grand Bassa County. The assessment was conducted using a set of questionnaires administered to a total of 70 respondents including 10 CFMB members, 10 Executive Committee members, 30 Community Assembly members and, 20 non-members of the community governance structures including women leaders, youth leaders and elders. The same number of respondents was interviewed in each CFMA community. The preliminary findings from the Key Informant Interviews were validated in two Focus Group Discussions that brought together community members that did not participate in Key Informant Interviews.

footnotes

¹CRL, Section 2.1a

²CRL, Section 2.1b

³CRL, Section 2.2g

⁴CRL, Section 3.1b

⁵CRL, Section 3.1d

⁶CRL, Section 4.1 & 4.2

⁷Deliverable D02/5 Chain of Custody Operation Report and D02/4: Legality Verification Operation Report, February 2018

A key limitation is that the scope of the study was limited to two communities. However, the selection of the communities was purposely representative of the two categories of CFMAs that are dominant in the sector, i.e. those with interest in conservation, and those with interest in logging. While the findings may not be representative, they do provide valuable insights into factors influencing community decisions about the forest management regime to use.

4. Main findings

1. The interests of the actor that lend early support to the community influenced the community's preference. In the community where people with logging interest influenced the application for CFMA, the preference was for logging and in the community where conservation was first introduced, the preference was for conservation.

2. None of the respondents could identify a commercial forest enterprise in their community, although individuals do commercialize various forest products. When quizzed on the local trades in forest products, they argued that only individuals could do those businesses therefore they don't see them as enterprises that could be community-owned.

3. Because individuals that establish forest-based enterprises do so for their own benefits, and often do not share benefits with the wider community, third-party logging is considered a fair medium for generating revenue that benefits all.

4. In the community that preferred logging, respondents said their community has already entered into an agreement with a logging company. Although the company was not active, the respondents were hopeful that their community would receive benefits from the operation.



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5. Date and analysis

5.1 Barcauline Community

The Barcauline-Harmonsville community is situated in District No. 3A of Grand Bassa County and comprises of 16 villages and hamlets. The community first submitted its application for a CFMA on 24th April 2013. The process commenced with support from the USAID-funded People, Rules and Organization Supporting the Protection of Ecosystem Resources or PROSPER program. The CFMA was signed 22nd February 2017 and covers 123 hectares distributed in four blocks namely Donnie, Kokpeh, Paye and Varyoncon. The community Forest Management Plan prioritizes conservation of the patches of forest covered by the CFMA.

In Barcauline-Harmonsville a total of 35 persons were interviewed. The respondents included 5 CFMB members, 5 Executive Committee members, 15 members of the Community Assembly and 10 persons that are not members of any of the community forest governance structures. One Focus Group Discussion was organized to validate the preliminary findings.

Of the 35 respondents, 30 said that they established the CFMA for conservation. These respondents noted that the CFMA is not viable for logging because none of the timber has known commercial value. They also reported that the tree species that are commonly used for construction locally and in Buchanan are rare in the area therefore chainsaw operators do not find the area attractive. The remaining 5 respondents said they are only involved in fishing and do not participate in meetings regarding forest. One of them asked rhetorically: *'but where is the forest you are talking about'*; suggesting that the patches of forest including mangroves in the community did not qualify as forest.

All the respondents said that the community is predominantly a fishing community although a limited number of the people engage in subsistence farming. They harvest the mangroves for drying the fish brought in by the fishermen. The main economic activities in the area are linked to the artisanal fishing sector.

The *reported* interest in conservation appears to be driven by the two factors. First, efforts to establish the community forest started with conservation education under the PROSPER program. The financial and technical supports PROSPER provided throughout

the process also explain the level of conservation thinking among the members of the CFMB, Executive Committee and Community Assembly. Second, viewed through the eyes of others from rural Grand Bassa or Rivercess County, there is no forest in the area. The mangroves are not considered forest because the sizes of the trees are smaller than those found in forest and normally do not contain the wildlife and medicinal plants normally collected from the forest.



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5.2 Beyan Poye Community

Gibi District, situated in Margibi County, is said to have the last remaining significant forest blocks in the Barnyou Town, Whoagbar Town, Bassie Town and Willie Town areas. In 2011, the FDA awarded a Private Use Permit covering 22,162 hectares to the People of Gibi District for commercial logging purposes. According to the SIIB Report, the logging company, Akewa Group of Companies subsequently entered into a (social) agreement with the People of Gibi to log the forest covered by the permit and pay land rental of \$1.00 and royalty of \$1.50 per cubic meter of timber harvested in the community.⁸ In response to widespread illegality and fraud perpetuated during the allocation processes, the Government of Liberia imposed a moratorium on logging within Private Use Permit areas in January 2013.⁹

The Beyan Poye Community, comprising of Gbassie Town, Whogban Town, Barnyon Town, and Willie Town, is situated within Gibi District, applied for a CFMA on 20th June 2014¹⁰ and Beyan Poye was granted approval on 22nd February 2017. The Beyan Poye CFMA covers a total of 33,338 hectares of forest.¹¹ The objectives outlined in the community's Forest Management Plan are to engage in logging and, develop and support small and medium forest enterprises by building the

capacity of community members to improve harvesting, processing, and marketing of forest products.

In Worhn, a total of 35 persons were interviewed. As in the Barcauline-Harmonsville Community, the respondents included the 5 CFMB members, the 5 Executive Committee members, 15 members of the Community Assembly and 10 persons that are not members of any of the community forest governance structures. Also, one Focus Group Discussion was organized to validate the preliminary findings. Of the 35 respondents, 19 were men and 16 were women.

All of the respondents preferred logging because according to them logging companies provide jobs and other development benefits to the community. Three respondents were particularly critical of chainsaw operators because according to them, they destroy the forest and do not provide any real benefit to the community and, oftentimes enter the community through an influential community member to avoid paying reasonable royalties to the community.

Asked whether they planned to pursue logging by themselves 28 of the 35 respondents said they already had an agreement with a company to conduct logging operations in the CFMA. The other 7 respondents said they had only heard reports that a logging company was coming to their area but had no other details about when the company would come or where they would be based. Nearly all the respondents said their community did not have the financial means and technical know-how to conduct their own logging. Asked if they would accept external help, all of them said they do not know if such assistance was possible. Probed further on the question, they expressed doubt because according to them they already had an agreement with a company.

The respondents that appeared more knowledgeable and confident said that the community has signed an agreement with the Akewa Group of Companies to log in their CFMA, but the company is yet to commence operation. They reported that the company hosted several meetings with them in 2016 and 2017 prior to the agreement.

This seems to explain the apparent preference for logging. Akewa has been active in the area before, when it logged under the Private Use Permit allocated to the People of Margibi back in 2011; the same towns

footnotes

¹⁰Letter signed by Nathaniel Bob Moses, Sr. President of the Gibi District Development Association, and several other persons.

An earlier letter signed by Elder Sam Barnyou referencing the same forest and community is dated 5th September 2013.

¹¹List of Community Forests approved after moratorium was lifted (undated)

⁸Special Independent Investigative Body, Report on the Issuance of Private Use Permits (PUPs), December 2012

⁹Executive Order No. 44, on Protecting Liberian Forests by a Temporary Moratorium on Private Use Permits

listed on the Private Use Permit are the same towns listed on the CFMA application letter. Given this history, and based on experiences from other parts of the country, it can be deduced that once logging under the permit was halted, the community sought a CFMA to continue their logging operations.

6. Conclusions

Several conclusions can be drawn based on the findings of this assessment, although the geographic scope was limited.

1. When investigating opportunities for enterprise development it may be desirable to think beyond the household level, i.e. the traditional livelihoods activities often promoted as alternatives.
2. Local populations favor commercial forestry activities that deliver benefit to the wider community; those that deliver benefits at the household level are less favored.
3. Given the apparent relationship between the type of stakeholder involved with a community and the local preferred forest management regime, preferences should be thoroughly interrogated against criteria designed to assess potential sustainability as well as commercial viability.
4. The information and knowledge gaps between community members actively involved in the CFMA application process and those that were less involved were stark. When investigating opportunities for community-based forest enterprises, special consideration should be given this situation.

5. Respondents in the Barcauline-Harmonsville community were less enthusiastic about the CFMA in their area. This suggests that community members do not value forest resources that are not commercially valuable in the local context.



The Sustainable Development Institute (SDI) works to transform decision-making processes in relation to natural resources and to promote equity in the sharing of benefits derived from natural resource management in Liberia. The organization's vision is a Liberia in which natural resource management is guided by the principles of sustainability and good governance and benefits all Liberians. Its activities cover a range of crosscutting issues including governance and management, the environment, state and corporate social responsibility, economic and social justice for rural populations, and the democratic participation of ordinary people in government management of natural resources. The organization received the Goldman Environmental Prize (the world's largest prize honouring grassroots environmentalists for outstanding environmental achievements) in 2006



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