POVERTY AND ENVIRONMENTAL DEGRADATION IN CAMEROON

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Contents

1. Introduction and Background
2. Methodology
3. The Cameroon Environment
4. Poverty in Cameroon
5. Causes of Poverty Leading to Environmental Degradation
5.1. Economic Causes
5.2 Institutional Causes
5.3. Governance
6. Conclusions and Recommendations
Bibliography

Summary

This chapter demonstrates that the poor degrade the environment through their survival activities. The forces driving the poor to degrade the environment are the lack of alternative economic activities, ignorance and a land tenure system that is non-functional and not understood by the poor whose survival depends on the environment. The declining economic situation is obliging the poor to value the present more than the future. The poor view land and other natural resources as the property of the commons, requiring no particular investment from them. Migration and the mix of cultures have killed the traditional institutions that ensured the conservation of certain plant and animal species through the system of taboos. The poor degrade the environment through improper farming practices, indiscriminate- and over-hunting, conversion of forests into farmland, and over-exploitation of non-timber forest products. These activities alter the forest cover, decimate species, alter and destroy habitats, thus endangering ecosystem functioning.

1. Introduction and Background

Cameroon is a country that evokes mixed but mostly sad feelings in people. Although the country is well endowed with natural resources, millions of Cameroonians are languishing in poverty. The country is one of striking diversity, unfulfilled promise and tantalizing potential. Its regions abound in variety—geography, climate, people, culture, language, education and economic structure.

Up to 1985 Cameroon's economy had been growing steadily, supported by the

agricultural sector. In 1986 the economy suffered a sharp reversal and GDP per capita declined by 6.3% per year between 1985 and 1993. The country adopted an IMF-designed structural adjustment programme (SAP), in 1988, which was based on internal adjustments, emphasizing liberalization of economic activity, reliance on markets and increased competition and efficiency to reduce domestic costs and prices. As part of the internal adjustment, civil servants' salaries were cut by as much as 60%, and thousands were laid off. Poverty rose sharply between 1986 and 1994. A World Bank study (1995) showed that even in the Capital city of Yaounde, which suffered the effects of the economic crisis least, the level of per capita consumption was 10% lower than it had been 30 years previously. The number of rural households below the poverty line rose from 49% to over 70% from 1986 to 1994.

An aspect of this economic collapse with negative impacts on the environment is reverse migration by laid-off civil servants. Most of these people returned to the rural areas with chain saws to intensify degradation of the environment, as this became the area of refuge.

What the collapse of the economy did was bring to the fore an underlying poverty situation that had been eating up the society gradually. Poverty has been identified as the principal cause of environmental degradation (NEMP, 1996). The poor lack adequate means and modern knowledge to ensure effective protection and sustainable development of natural resources. Depletion of environmental resources, the lifeline of the poor, leads to more poverty. The resulting situation is a vicious cycle where poverty is both the cause and effect of environmental degradation. Although poverty has always existed, the change in the fortunes of Cameroon has made the situation worse by increasing the number of poor people and by expanding the dimensions of poverty to include social, political, moral and spiritual poverty. These changes also suggest that poverty is a dynamic social relation that has become the outcome of competition among groups for productive assets. It is reproduced by on-going social, economic, spiritual, and political processes that result in the concentration or deprivation of influence, wealth and environmental assets that are requisites for social well being.

2. Methodology

This study looks at the poverty–environment link at the ecosystem or rural level, and in terms of a wider degradation perspective. The study addresses in a very direct way the precipitous decline in ecological diversity and the extinction of species. Environmental degradation is, therefore, considered here in terms of the loss of species or reduction in biodiversity, which occurs through loss or alteration of habitat or direct elimination of species, like exploiting species to extinction. Habitat alteration is essentially the modification of land cover and of aquatic habitats for human use, which includes not only outright destruction or transformation but also reduction and fragmentation of habitats that in turn reduce the complexity of ecosystems.

Figures 1 and 2 provide conceptual frameworks that show how this study looks at the linkages between poverty and environmental degradation. Poverty is caused by social, political and economic factors. The social factors though not explicitly indicated include social policies, societal values and norms, and cultural conflicts, which are influencing

the perceptions of the local populations and influencing the way they exploit environmental goods.

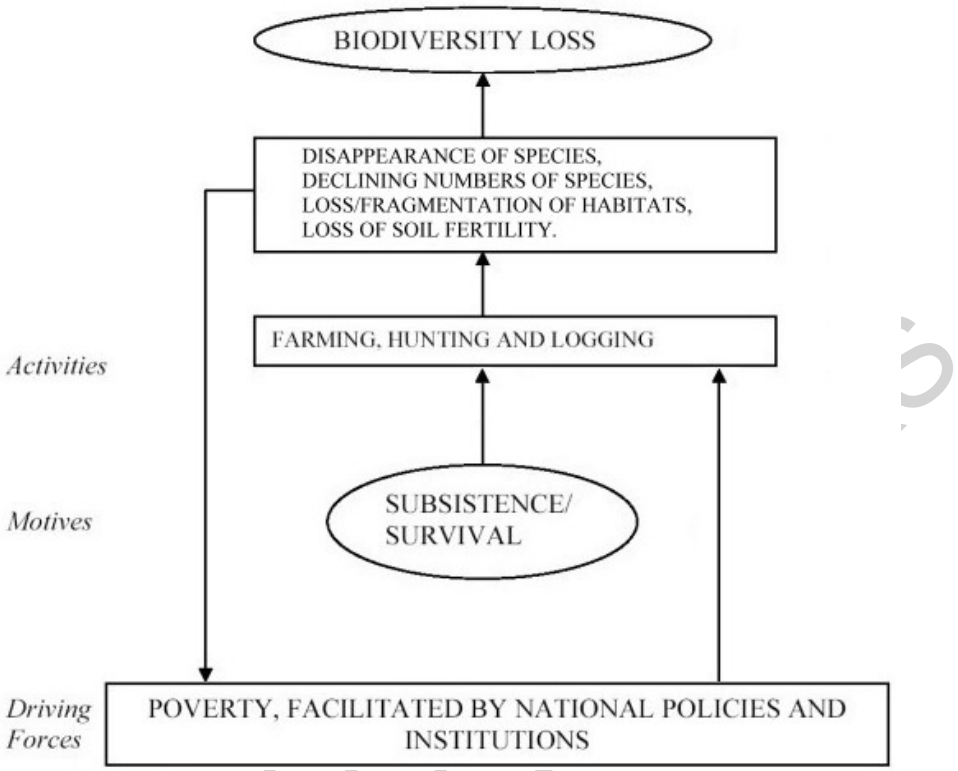

Figure 1. Conceptual framework

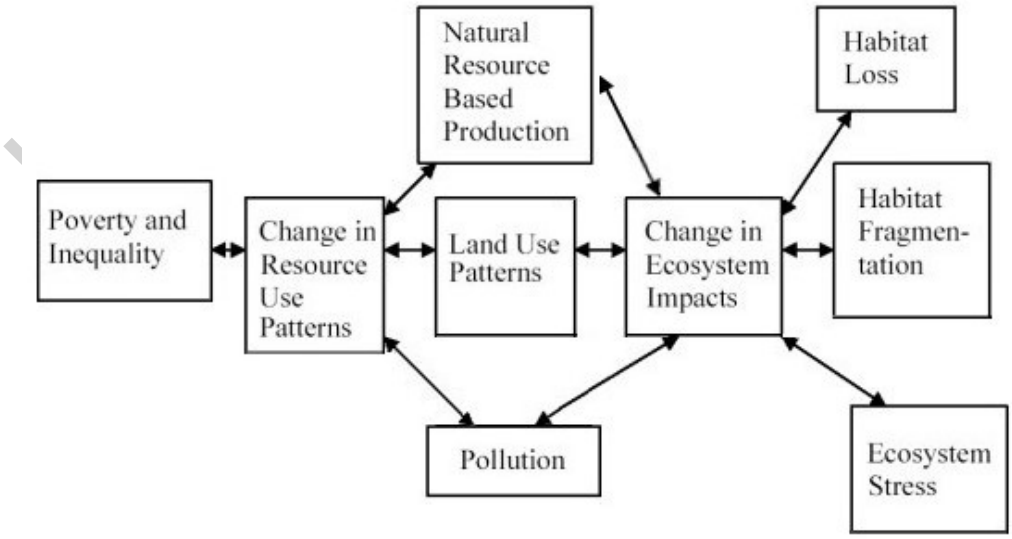

Figure 2. Causal framework for poverty and environmental degradation

Political and institutional factors also play an important role in the management of resources. The lack of coherent policies and of strong institutions tend to facilitate the harvesting of environmental goods. Poor people are able to colonise neighbourhoods, especially the fragile ones because policies and institutions tend to be weak. Economic factors include commodity prices, the demand for agricultural products and subsistence requirements. These policies and factors tend to serve as driving forces for the harvesting of environmental goods. Furthermore, the demand pressure on these resources is exacerbated by population increase through high birth rates and immigration, both being typical phenomena of the poor.

3. The Cameroon Environment

Cameroon extends from Lake Chad south through Sahel and Sudan savanna into gallery and semi-deciduous forest, and then the dense, humid evergreen forest zone. These bands of vegetation run roughly parallel to the southern edge of the Sahara. Complicating this zonation is the orogenic structure: the uplifting of the basement complex into crystalline mountains and—a major feature of Cameroon—the overlaying of these by basalt and the creation of volcanic mountains. The parallel zones are broken by these elevation changes into altitudinally determined, distinct vegetational communities, submontane forest and subalpine grassland on the highest peaks (Tchoungui *et al* 1996).

The country has exceptionally high biological diversity and high levels of endemism. Plant and mammal endemism is highest in the moist evergreen forest belt along the coast and decreases as biomes become drier. The geographical distribution of many endemic forest species is very narrow compared with that of the drier biomes.

These conditions make it possible for the principal economic activity of the human population, agriculture, which also serves subsistence purposes (along with hunting and trapping). While some export crops are derived from industrial plantations, the vast majority of cash crops are derived from smallholder farming. Traditional smallholder farms are less than 2 hectares in area. These occupy 90% of cultivated areas and supply 90% of agricultural production and 80% of marketed products (Tchoungui *et al*). The farming systems are predominantly based on slash-and-burn and bush fire practices. Traditional farming methods are hampered by limited access to agricultural inputs and equipment. Some small-holder fishing is done in the inland waters and off the Atlantic Coast. There is also commercial logging and some petroleum exploitation.

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