



Regional Land Observatories

Monitoring the impact of land acquisitions on
local and indigenous communities in Cameroon



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Development (COMAID)**
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Introduction

Land Observatories (LOs) monitor how large-scale land deals impact the environment, culture, and traditional ways of life of local and indigenous communities.

They try to understand how local, regional, national and transnational land transactions in agriculture, forestry, mining, ranching, and livestock keeping impact livelihoods.

LOs facilitate inclusive participation of local partners in the process of data collection, validation and mapping. LOs equally help local communities to use data to advocate for their rights and negotiate better access to their natural resources.

Community Assistance In Development (COMAID) initiated the creation of Regional Land Observatories (RLOs) in Cameroon to monitor land acquisitions and it disrupts the natural environment, and the livelihoods of local and indigenous communities.

The first Regional Observatory was created in the North West region in 2013, called the North West Land Observatory (NWLO). The experience of NWLO was shared with Civil Society Organisations (CSOs) in three other regions which resulted in the creation of the South West Land Observatory, the South Land Observatory and recently the Littoral land Observatory. This story paper discusses their work.



North West Land Observatory (NWLO)

The North West Land Observatory (NWLO) was created on 27th June 2013 in Bamenda. COMAID first introduced the idea in the region, before CSOs working in the area of land and natural resource governance joined.

NWLO has more than 21 CSOs with focal points at divisional levels, including:

Community Assistance In Development (COMAID), the Mbororo Social and Cultural Development Association (MBOSCUDA), the Community Initiative for Sustainable Development (COMINSUD), the North West Farmers' Organisation, (NOWEFOR), Charmers Media and Communication Consults (CHAMECC), Community Human Rights and Advocacy Centre (CHRAC), the North West Federation of Cattle Breeders (NOWEFCAB), the Network of Environmental Stakeholders Cameroon (NEST-Cam), Women in Action against Gender-Based Violence (WACameroon), the Media Synergy for the Promotion of Biodiversity Conservation and Community Development against Climate Change-Cameroon (MECCOD), the Local Governance Promotion Network (LOGONET), Green Care, Livestock and Crop Farmers Union of Taa zone (LICROFUTAZ), the Youth Association for Justice (YAFJ), and Social Enterprise for Environmental Development (SEED).

The objective of NWLO is to assist local communities to gain secured land and resource rights of their customary land through whistleblowing, lobbying and advocacy and direct targeted action to communities in crisis.

Over its nine years of existence, NWLO has recorded great successes. NWLO helped Mbororo Pastoralists on the Mamada hills in Ndzah fight eviction when the Catholic University wanted to push them out of their lands in 2014. Between 2013 and 2016, NWLO strengthened local communities in the Mbaw plain to resist encroachment and unfair expropriation of their lands when the Cameroon Development Corporation (CDC) plantations wanted to grab their arable lands.

Thanks to COMAID's help, the community mounted legal and traditional challenges that enabled them to regain control over their lands and natural resources. Furthermore, NWLO supported traditional rulers, women, and youth groups in 2015 to engage the land reform process in Cameroon. There, they held government officials and lawmakers accountable and shared ideas that informed Cameroon's land policy revision process.

In 2017, a violent conflict between Mambilas (farmers) and Fulani (grazers) drove 4500 refugees from Taraba State in Nigeria into Cameroon. NWLO supported them with emergency food relief and helped the refugees to settle in Nkambe, in the North West region of Cameroon. In 2018, NWLO conducted a survey in the same region on farmer-grazier conflicts. It revealed that 51% of villages in the region were conflict hotspots and prompted authorities to have a different look at the land issues there.

In 2020, NWLO supported locals in the Ebo Forest, a stronghold for Cameroon's wildlife to protest against the government's intention to open the forest for logging. The Ebo Forest, situated in the Littoral region of Cameroon is home to many critically endangered species including; forest elephants, drills and chimpanzees. Because of the fierce opposition from local communities, as well as from national and international CSOs, the President of the Republic of Cameroon suspended the operation.



South West Land Observatory (SWLO)

The South West Land Observatory (SWLO) was created on 7th August 2019 at the Capitol Hotel Buea, inspired by the successes of NWLO.

SWLO has 12 CSO members; including the Nkong Association for Development (NADEV), Ajemalebu Self Help (AJESH), the Environment Governance Institute (EGI), the Food and Rural Development Foundation (FORUDEF), Elena NGO, the Environment and Rural Development Foundation (ERUDEF), Nature Cameroon (NC), the Youth Development Centre (YDC), the Organisation for Gender, Civil Engagement and Youth Development (OGCEYOD), the Association of Southwest Agriculturalists Rural Development and Environment Programme (ASWARUDEF), Educate a Child in Africa (ECA), and the Environmental Protection and Development Association (EPDA).

The overall objective of SWLO is to promote responsible land-based investments in the South West region of Cameroon. Specifically, SWLO promotes the use of Free, Prior, and Informed Consent (FPIC) in large-scale land acquisitions, denounces land grabbing, and monitors the respect of contract clauses.

Within the three years of existence, the observatory has supported the village of Tole to enable effective management of the land CDC ceded back to its community.

Community leaders were strengthened to use FPIC as a community tool to defend their interests and rights as elites threatened to own all the ceded lands.

Also, SWLO supported the Bulu village when influential and well-connected individuals wanted to use their village name to dispossess the University of Buea off its campus lands. SWLO helped the village to demarcate its lands and secure them, cutting off the land grabbers.

The pressure resulted in the temporary suspension of the process of issuing land titles in the Fako Division by the administration.



South Land Observatory (SLO)

The South Land Observatory was created on 23rd August 2019 at Fidelie Hotel in Kribi. This was the first Regional Observatory planted in the French speaking part of Cameroon, following an experience sharing with COMAID on 4th September 2018. SLO currently has around 8 members including: Centre d'Information et de Formation pour l'Environnement et le développement (CIFED), Soutien au Développement Durable (SDD), Women's Promotion and Assistance Association (WOPA), Cercle d'Appui au Développement Rural (CADER), Centre d'Appui au Développement Local Alternatif (CeDLA), Cercle de Promotion des Forêts et des Initiatives Locales de Développement (CEPFILD), Bagyeli Cultural and Development Association (BACUDA), and Appui pour la Protection de l'Environnement et le Développement (APED).

The vision of SLO is to see a region where land is sustainably and responsibly managed while assuring the rights of local and indigenous communities are protected. Its mission is to work towards preserving and securing the land rights of these communities

SLO's overall objective is to contribute towards the improvement of land governance in the South region. Specifically, it exists to:

- Influence the process of allocating concessions on land, mining, forest and agro industries to companies in the South region.
- Promote inclusive dialogue in land tenure occupation processes.
- Create community awareness on land issues.
- Inform and monitor the implementation of international commitments made by companies.

Within its three years of existence, SLO has made strides in educating and supporting communities. Because it raised awareness of local communities on how to use FPIC to improve participation and negotiate better land investment deals with agro companies in their region, locals are able to use the approach to have increased say in land investments. For instance, the Bantu and the Bagyeli indigenous tribes used the FPIC approach to protest against the government's decision to award 60,000 Hectares of land to Camvert , an agro-industrial company for investment. Locals argued that there was no public participation in the process and that they did not give full consent. Because of this, the process of finalising the agreement did not materialise.



Littoral Land Observatory (LLO)

The Littoral Land Observatory (LLO) was created on the 26th April 2021 by 10 CSOs, motivated by the success stories of NWLO shared by COMAID in a CSO meeting. The members of LLO includes: Action pour le Développement Communautaire (ADC), Jeunesse Intègre pour le Développement Durable (JIDD), SEKAKOH, Cameroun Ecologie (CAM-ECO), Un MOND AVENIR, Association des Chefs Traditionnels Riverains de la Foret D'Ebo (ACTRIFE), CLEAN CAMEROON, Association Communauté et Développement Durable (CODED), Collectif des Femmes pour la Protection de L'Environnement et de L'Enfant (COFEPRE), and Ebo Forest Research Project (EFRP).

The overall objective of LLO is to promote land and forest governance in the Littoral region in favour of the rights of local communities. Specifically, LLO exists to:

- To enable local communities to know their rights and better understand the trends and impacts of large-scale land grabbing.
- Promote lobby actions with decision-makers and investors in order to respect the rights of local communities.
- Enhance capacity strengthening of local communities on FPIC and other lobby tools.
- To use tools for data collection and analysis in view to document and follow-up land and forest concessions.

LLO was among the CSO groups that campaigned against the government's decision to open the Ebo Forest for logging. The observatory has the task to monitor forest projects around the Ebo forest.

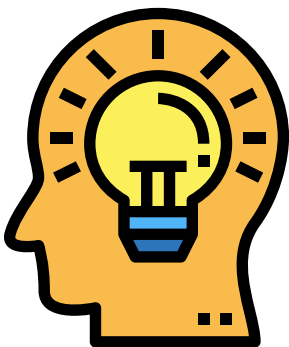
Challenges

Though Regional Land Observatories (RLOs) in Cameroon have had some success in recent years, they are not without challenges. The three main problems that RLOs face every day include funding and finance, technical ability, and ensuring the safety of land defenders.



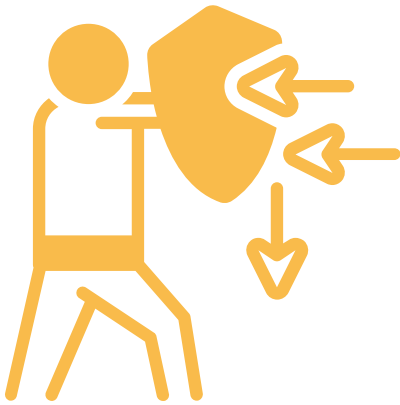
Funding and finance

Most regional observatories lack funding to run their operations. This has limited their ability to lead important activities. To combat such challenges, RLOs are working with NWLO to build their capacity to use local connections and opportunities to raise funds for projects. They also work with COMAID to develop new ideas to raise funds from charitable organisations and from institutions that fund land rights and human rights activities. Though these efforts can help, they are not enough. RLOs need intensive training on how to raise and manage funds.



Technical ability

Most RLOs are coordinated by local community-based organisations, which sometimes do not have enough educated people amongst their membership. Because of this, they are unable to effectively handle operations such as mapping, resource valuation, and drive legal challenges on land matters. SLO, for example, has a functioning secretariat, yet lacks the skills to develop a charter to guide its operations, work plans, and reporting. Inspired by NWLO's experience, RLOs are encouraged to give opportunities to young graduates who can understand geographic information system (GIS) technologies to volunteer for them. But this effort cannot solve the competence issue of RLOs. They need more support to understand land matters and learn new tricks on how to deal with them.



Security and safety of land defenders

RLO members face physical and verbal attacks, harassment, and intimidation as they try to defend land rights. In the North West and South West, the situation has been worsened by the Anglophone crisis, which has heightened insecurity in the regions. Because of the situation, defenders face death threats and are increasingly intimidated.

Because of insecurity, NWLO and SWLO are unable to get a consistent flow of information from focal points at subdivisional levels up to the regions. This has slowed activities in these parts of the country.

But RLOs are not backing down. They choose to employ the more diplomatic but safe tactics to campaign for rights. For instance, they now reach out to policymakers directly and make their case on land governance than going to conflict-ridden areas to campaign for community rights.

Another safety situation that has dramatically slowed activities is the global coronavirus pandemic. It for, example prevented community meetings and made campaigning and public demonstrations impossible in the country.

Way forward

RLOs play a vital role in the land dynamics of Cameroon. Working on the following challenges can further strengthen the ability of RLOs to better defend the land and environmental resource rights:

- There is a need to put in place safeguards measures within the regional observatory members to limit the risk of victimisation. Because it is important to give them appropriate capacity as land and environmental rights defenders and put in place an alert system to track when a member is in danger.
- LLO will need more training to enhance its work and to grow its membership.
- Putting in place a geographic information system (GIS) database of all the land concessions in the four regions can help support evidence-based advocacy.
- The observatories need to work more with traditional institutions to build trust and support them to assume the frontline role in redress processes. Many communities are facing the threats of eviction, and investment projects that affect the lifestyles, culture, sacred sites, vital spaces, and their livelihoods, but they do not know how to go about it.
- There is a need to equip local and indigenous communities and provide them with tools to lead peaceful processes to defend their land and resource rights.

Acknowledgements

We want to thank CSOs who have joined the Regional Observatories and have invested their time and energy to support local communities in the daunting task of improving access to their land and life resources.

We equally thank those local communities who have taken the lead in peaceful redress processes to restore their traditional ways of life by securing their rights to life resources and their vital spaces. Finally, we thank those who are supporting our actions to improve land governance and access to life resources for traditional and indigenous communities in Cameroon.

**We thank you for your continued support
in our efforts to contribute to land
governance in Cameroon**

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