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Introduction

Recognition of the role of forests in conserving species and mitigating climate change has given rise to the notion of sustainable forest management practices worldwide. Furthermore, local people's access to protected forest areas have been shifting in the past decades. It is hypothesised that the type of traditional food custom practices of indigenous persons (IPs) and/or local communities (LCs) have direct and indirect effects on especially collaborative forest management practices. Research is therefore needed to continuously understand and document the relationship between '*Traditional Food Customs and Collaborative Forest Management*'. This report reduces this knowledge gap by presenting findings on '*Traditional Food Customs and Collaborative Forest Management*', within the Congo Basin, taking the case of Cameroon and the Central African Republic (CAR).

2. Research Methodology

This study was conducted in the Loussou community in Dimako Sub division, Upper Nyong Division in the East Region of Cameroon as well as in the Central African Republic using a mixed methods approach. With this approach, a focus group discussion (FGD) session was organized with 10 (6 men and 4 women) IPs to capture current traditional food custom practices as well as current forest management practices.



Figure 1: Focus group discussion session

In addition to the FGD, four (three from Cameroon and one from the CAR) key informant interviews (KIIs) were conducted so as to triangulate information obtained from the focus group discussion. This was also complemented by field observations. Data collected was then grouped into various themes so as to ease interpretation and discussion of the findings.



Figure 2: Key informant interview

3. Key Findings

This section presents the key findings from the data collected. It begins with a summary of the characteristics of the different key informants.

Table 1: Characteristics of key informants

Country	Status	Sex	Age	Educational level	Years in position
Cameroon	Community leader	Male	34 years	BEPC	17
	Centre Prescolaire Communautaire	Female	50 years	University level	05
	Coordinateur OKANI	Male	55 years	Bachelor Degree	20
	Program Coordinator	Male	29 years	Master Degree	05
CAR	Conseiller Technique	Male	51 years	Master Degree	14

3.1. Perceptions on Traditional Food Customs Practices in Cameroon

Before exploring the perceptions, it is important to identify some of the traditional food/fruits obtained from the forest by the dwellers. As observed and reported by the IPs, wild yams, bush mango, gobo, ka'ana, cocoa, mushroom, medicinal plants, as well as cash crops such as plantain, pineapple and cassava. It is also worth mentioning that these forest dwellers transform cassava into other products such as the locally known 'Water Fufu', 'Kum Kum' and 'Bobolo'.



Figure 3: Some crops cultivated within the forest area



3.1.1. Perceptions on Cultural Significance

As stipulated by the KIIs in Cameroon, traditional food brings people together, thereby improving cultural heritage, maintaining mother-tongue, improving communication as well as traditional and/or historical knowledge sharing. Although, there is a slight change of interest in traditional food customs, the cultural value for these food types still upholds in the IPLCs. Similarly, the KII for the Central African Republic (CAR) indicated that traditional foods play a significant role in the preservation of cultural identity and conventional wisdom. More so, in CAR, they constitute key cultural identities especially during traditional rituals which reflects the level of attachment to ancestral links by the IPs.

Information from the FGD indicated that traditional knowledge linked to mushroom harvesting and wild yam is passed down from generation to generation. For instance, it is the traditional belief amongst the Baka community that knowledge on mushroom consumption can be gotten from wild animals. Based on the belief, any mushroom that the wild animals eat can also be eaten by them. Without this knowledge transferred downstream, errors can be made and poisonous mushrooms harvested and eaten by younger generations.

To conclude, cultural significance of forests and traditional food systems for Indigenous Peoples and Local Communities has shifted from being a living foundation of identity, spirituality, and social cohesion to a more fragmented and endangered heritage, as deforestation, land loss, and modernization have disrupted the ability to practice and pass down cultural traditions tied to the land.

3.1.2. Perceptions on Health

In Cameroon, more and more community people tend to suffer from diseases due to an increase in consumption of external products like oil, *Maggi* (*Maggi is a commercially processed culinary spice blend, formulated to add umami and depth to a wide range of cooked foods.*), salt etc which has made them to have negative perceptions about these manufactured products. This probably explains why IPLCs feel at ease when they eat local foods harvested from the forest. According to them, these foods (for instance oil from nuts, Djaga, Nguiwba and Tondo) are natural and of good health conditions. On the other hand, information for CAR indicates that IPs perceive traditional foods to be healthy as it is natural and not grown with chemicals, has not been transformed and contains essential elements (fibres, vitamins, etc.) for human growth.

3.1.3. Intergenerational Views

Older people see traditional food as an important part of their culture and identity, but many younger people think it's old-fashioned, so fewer of them are learning, cooking, or passing on these food traditions. As mentioned during the FGD, the forest is seen as a big super market by these communities. These communities harvest nuts for instance from the forest from which oil for cooking is derived. More so, spices such as locally called 'Country Onion' are also harvested. As explained by the members of the FGD, they know exactly where to get each item from the forest, knowledge which is passed down from generation to generation. In addition to this, it was reported that the Baka women who are pregnant do not eat domesticated animals with the fear that it may affect their newborn babies as lots of drugs and chemicals are used to feed these domesticated animals. They therefore rely on either wild animals and/or meat from animals hunted from the forest.

Information from the KIIs in Cameroon revealed that on 5 community gatherings with the IPs for instance, you can have only one time they prepare an indigenous food although they have all the ingredients in the forest, e.g. ka'ana that can replace groundnut to make a soup out of it. This shows that the actual generation tends to prepare for visitors local foods which are not indigenous ones. During the periods of gathering food/fruits from the forests, the intergenerational knowledge transfer aspect of work is very visible as the elders who are



considered as masters teach the younger generations on the techniques of gathering without destroying the biodiversity and for the sustainability of the trees. Therefore, by staying together in the forest, passing down of traditional wisdom and forest gathering techniques is ensured.

However, it was observed in both Cameroon and CAR that the younger generations are more interested in modern and processed food such as rice and spaghetti. This as explained is partly due to the fact that people's views on health and traditional foods have changed from seeing them as part of a healthy and meaningful way of life to focusing more on modern ideas of nutrition, making traditional diets seem less important and causing more health problems in Indigenous and local communities.

3.1.4. Perceptions on Preservation Challenges

Preserving the forest has and is still a challenge for these communities as in addition to traditional causes of deforestation, there is also increased encroachment by mining companies, and the installation of large poultry farms in Indigenous communities.



Figure 4: Large scale poultry production

As indicated by the KIIs in Cameroon, more and more efforts are made to promote cultural food systems like the organisation of cultural events where the IPLCs can showcase their traditional and indigenous food systems. Much effort is also done in supporting the valorisation of non-timber forest products (NTFPs), which many communities rely on. Despite these measures, we find some products becoming rare due to forest exploitation such as Moabi tree which gives quantitative and qualitative oil to the IPLCs. Some of these communities were found not to even be practicing any conservation or preservation strategies. Information from the FGD revealed strong interest to preserve the forest, especially the Baka community. According to them, preserving the forest ensures that their youth will be able to farm and harvest from the forest to feed themselves, if not, they will be forced to move into the farm lands of the Bamtu's which can create conflicts. However due to continuous deforestation, logging, climate change, torrential rains and high winds that makes the flowers of NTFPs to fall off before maturity, their harvests are reduced, and in some cases complete extinction. Therefore, collaborative forest management is highly recommended.

In CAR, the main challenge in preservation is linked to the loss of traditional knowledge due to urbanization, changes in social life and modernization especially when the parents are seen as vectors of this transmission. More so, production has also been reduced by climate change, soil degradation in addition to commercial agriculture, and the harvesting of NTFPs.

Climate change and deforestation thus affect the availability and quality of crops used in traditional foods, making preservation more difficult. Traditional ways of saving and storing food are being lost because fewer people know how to do them, busy modern lives leave less time for them, and changes in the environment and food systems make it harder to keep these traditions alive.

3.1.5. Perceptions on Role in Daily Life

Traditional food is now often seen more as a symbol of heritage than a daily need, especially among younger generations. Traditional foods used to be a regular part of daily life, but now many people see them as something for special occasions, so they're no longer cooked or used as often in everyday meals. In the case of Cameroon, information from the focus group discussions (FGDs) revealed that Bantu women generally do not consume wild foods, unlike Baka women. According to participants, Bantu women often perceive the Baka as less "civilized" and tend to undervalue the wild foods that Baka women gather and consume. Farming, which was primarily subsistence-based in 2015, has become increasingly commercialized. Both mixed and mono-cropping (including plantation systems) are now practiced, mainly by the Bantu community, the missionary organization *Food For Life*, and civil servants working in and around Dimako. This shift toward commercial agriculture is driven by high demand from the World Food Program's Bertoua office and the growing need for animal feed production in the area. These Indigenous Peoples (IPs) reported that they do not use chemical fertilizers in their farming practices and often cultivate multiple crops on the same piece of land, as part of their efforts to preserve the forest's biodiversity. Both Baka and Bantu women rely on wood for cooking, but their approaches differ: Baka women collect only dry wood that has naturally fallen from trees, while Bantu communities use chainsaws to fell trees for charcoal production and fuelwood.



Figure 5: Charcoal for marketing

In both Cameroon and the Central African Republic (CAR), local foods are valued not only as sources of energy and food security but also as expressions of food sovereignty. These foods play a central role in community festivities, helping to sustain traditional practices. In some cases, processed nuts are also used in cosmetic products. Forests and their resources are further recognized as valuable for educational purposes, offering opportunities for both observational learning and practical application.

3.1.6. Perceptions on Gender Roles

Gender roles in traditional food customs are changing, with women who often held key roles in growing, preparing, and passing down food knowledge now facing more challenges as modern life gives them less time and recognition for these important traditions. As reported by the KIIs in Cameroon and the CAR, women are usually associated with cooking in a household, designing of traditional wears and as such, they are the ones who maintain the traditional food systems in vogue, while the men and the youth are mostly involved in gathering, hunting and collecting from the forest. A clear distinction is made for the roles of men, women, boys and girls. This aligns with findings from the focus group discussions (FGDs), which revealed that women are primarily involved in gathering wild yams, harvesting mushrooms, collecting medicinal plants, and inland forest fishing. In contrast, men tend to engage more in hunting, harvesting honey,

and collecting other tree and forest products (TFPs) of higher economic value.

3.1.7. Perceptions on Economic View

Traditional foods were once cultivated primarily for family and community consumption, but they are now often seen as less economically viable. As a result, many communities have shifted toward store-bought foods and commercial farming. To generate income, people increasingly harvest non-timber forest products (NTFPs), which help meet basic household needs. In addition, income is also derived from traditional food preparation and the sale of traditional clothing made from forest-sourced materials.

However, the overharvesting of NTFPs has reduced their availability for local consumption, especially beyond the seasonal periods. This has led to episodes of food scarcity in some communities. For example, in Cameroon, certain communities sell nearly all their harvested bush mangoes, retaining only a small amount for home use, which is insufficient for long-term consumption. This occurs despite bush mango being a key ingredient in a highly cherished traditional dish.

Similarly, the moabi tree has long been exploited for its valuable timber, even though the oil extracted from its seeds holds significant cultural and nutritional value for local communities. Today, while communities increasingly oppose the felling of moabi trees due to their dwindling numbers in communal lands, the species is now largely confined to forest management units areas where community access and usage rights are severely limited.

3.1.8. Perception on Modern Influence

In both the Cameroon and Central African Republic (CAR) case studies, there is a growing perception that communities are increasingly relying on external goods such as cooking oil, *Maggi* cubes, and other store-bought ingredients. Traditional agricultural practices have been altered, resulting in negative impacts on food production, product quality, and biodiversity. Additionally, the widespread importation of modern clothing and spices has undermined traditional food practices and dress codes. This shift is particularly pronounced among the younger generation, who tend to favor modern foods such as imported spices, rice, and spaghetti over traditional meals.

Then: People primarily consumed homemade meals prepared with local crops and wild foods.

Now: Processed, packaged, and fast foods have become more common due to their convenience and aggressive marketing, especially in urban areas.

3.1.9. Perception by Outsiders

Outsiders usually perceive indigenous food as one which they cannot eat because they usually have it in mind that the cooking process is not that hygienic as these people tend to look weird. In addition to this, outsiders consider it to be primitive eating foods/fruits directly harvested from the forest, or eating food without salt and/or *Maggi* in it. Information from CAR indicated that outsiders consider the traditional dresses as precious which has attracted many tourists in these areas. There is now a specialized market for these products as they are considered natural.





Figure 6: Overview of community's closeness with the forest

3.2. Key Traditional Food Practices

As can be observed on table 2 below, differences and similarities were observed in the traditional food custom practices in the Cameroon and CAR case studies. For instance, the intensity of harvesting NTFPs is very high for both the Cameroon and the CAR case studies (a mean score of 10/10 and 9/10 respectively). Similarly, there is also an increase in charcoal collection in both the Cameroon and the CAR case studies (a mean score of 6/10 and 7/10 respectively). On the other hand, there has been a decrease in the practice of inland forest fishing in both case studies (from a mean score of 10 to 7 for Cameroon and 8 to 6 in CAR) as well as harvesting of medicinal plants (from a mean score of 10 to 6 for Cameroon and 9 to 7 in CAR).

Information from the KIIs also revealed that commercial agriculture is more intense in Cameroon than in CAR (mean score of 10/10 and 7/10 respectively). This was also the case with hunting which showed higher intensity in Cameroon than in CAR (mean score of 10/10 and 6/10 respectively). See also results related to subsistence farming. This could probably be due to the differences in types of traditional foods customs as well the different types of forest management practices within these communities.

In contrast, fuel wood harvesting is higher in CAR as compared to Cameroon (mean scores of 9/10 and 7/10 respectively), as do gathering (mean scores of 8/10 and 5/10 respectively) as well as the practice of transhumance (mean scores of 7/10 in CAR and completely absent in Cameroon). This tie with the findings from the FGD as subsistence farming, fuel wood harvesting, charcoal collection, commercial agriculture, hunting, gathering, inland fishing, harvesting of medicinal plants and harvesting of NTFP were all identified as traditional food custom practices by these communities, also in varying intensities. More so, transhumance is also identified not to be practiced at the moment by these communities due to the presence of tsetse flies, which transmit trypanosomiasis, a blood parasite disease that affects cattle.

Table 2: Comparative analysis of traditional food custom practices

Traditional food customs practices	Case study	In 2015	In 2025	Status
Commercial agriculture (cocoa and cassava)	Cameroon	10	10	Stayed engaged
	CAR	7	7	
Hunting	Cameroon	10	10	Stayed engaged
	CAR	8	6	Decreased
Transhumance	Cameroon	0	0	Not practiced

	CAR	4	7	Returned of graziers
Harvesting of NTFPs	Cameroon	5	10	Increased
	CAR	9	9	Intense
Subsistence farming	Cameroon	6	8	Increased
	CAR	9	7	Deceased
Fuel wood harvesting	Cameroon	5	7	Increased
	CAR	10	9	Decreased
Charcoal collection	Cameroon	3	6	Increased
	CAR	6	7	
Inland forest fishing	Cameroon	10	7	Decreased
	CAR	8	6	
Harvesting of medicinal plants	Cameroon	10	6	Decreased
	CAR	9	7	
Gathering	Cameroon	8	5	Decreased
	CAR	9	8	Still engaged

3.3. Key Collaborative Forest Management Approaches Adopted

A summary of the different collaborative forest management practices has been done on table 3 below. As identified by the key informants, Forest Stewardship Council (FSC) Certification, Commercial agriculture, Forest Conservation, Participatory Forest Management (PFM), Community Forest Management (CFM), Community-Based Forest Management (CBFM), Agro-forestry practices and Agro-ecological farming were all practiced in both case studies, though at different degrees. On the other hand, the Development and use a Forest Management Plan (FMP), Climate Smart Agriculture (CSA), Bush Fallowing, REDD+, Collaborative Forest Management (CoFM), Forest Co-management (FCM) and Joint Forest Management (JFM) were peculiar to the CAR case study.



Figure 7: Some examples of forest management practices

Table 3: Types of collaborative forest management practices adopted

Collaborative forest management practices	Central African Republic		Cameroon	
	Year	Level	Year	Level
Develop and use a Forest Management Plan (FMP)	2016	6	NA	
Forest Stewardship Council (FSC) Certification	2012	6	NA	4
Climate Smart Agriculture (CSA)	2018	4	NA	
Commercial agriculture	2005	5	2010	Yes
Bush Fallowing	2005	8	NA	
Forest Conservation	2010	6	NA	Yes
REDD+	2012	5	2009	Yes
Participatory Forest Management (PFM)	2014	4	NA	Yes
Collaborative Forest Management (CoFM)	2016	4	2006	
Community Forest Management (CFM)	2018	3	NA	10
Forest Co-management (FCM)	2017	3	NA	
Joint Forest Management (JFM)	2019	2	NA	
Community-Based Forest Management (CBFM)	2017	3	NA	Yes
Agro-forestry practices	2008	5	2015	8
Agro-ecological farming	2020	4	2017	5

In both these case studies (table 4), traditional food customs practices were reported to have direct effects on collaborative forest management practices (though with very high effects in CAR as compared to Cameroon). As explained by one of the key informants, and I quote ‘A concrete example is the moabi case. IPLCs are interested in the moabi fruits from which they derive high quality and quantitative oil for cooking. These moabi trees tend to be found more in Forest management units (FMU) and have been exploited by this forest concession taking into consideration little or no IPLC interest in this plant species. As such, collaborative management can be fostered between the IPLCs and FMUs for a win-win partnership in the sustainable management of these moabi trees that will profit both parties’.

On the other hand, information from CAR indicated that traditional food customs can promote and preserve natural resources and foster sustainable forest management, with significant positive impacts against climate change. In addition to this, since the forest provides important NTFPs to the communities, it can push them to protect the forest environment. However, rudimentary agricultural/gathering/fishing practices can rather have negative effects on collaborative forest management.

In both case studies, there has been a vast reduction in the forest areas in the past 10 years. This as explained by the KIs is partly due to forest degradation and deforestation as a result of uncontrolled exploitation of forest natural resources, expansions in cash crop production by both IPLCs and agro industrial firms.



Table 4: Effect of traditional food customs practices on collaborative forest management

	Central African Republic	Cameroon
Traditional food customs practices affect the type of collaborative forest management practices	Yes	Yes
Level of effect of Traditional food customs practices on type of collaborative forest management practiced	Very high effect	High effect
Country's forest area in past 10 years	Decreased	Decreased

4. Suggestions to improve forest management in the Congo Basin

As suggested by the KIs (table 5 below), enforce the participation of local communities in forest management while at the same time train traditional rulers on environmental management that can boost collaborative forest management. More so, creating protected areas within the Congo Basin and also simplifying the procedures for creating community forests can be very useful. Providing awards to communities who practice sustainable collaborative forest management was also another key strategy. A case in point as reported by the FGD will be the Edjengui Forest Sacred Site in the Loussou Community in Baka, which is a sacred site still intact with current no deforestation activities, high concentration of medicinal plants as well as other NTFPs. As a management strategy, only those who are initiated are allowed to go in and harvest medicinal plants. This keeps the forest intact and makes management sustainable.

Table 5: Recommendations to improve collaborative forest management

Central African Republic	Cameroon
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Enforce the participation of local communities in forest management - Train traditional rulers on environmental management - Simplify the procedures for creating community forests - Promote Sustainable Livelihood Alternatives e.g <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Introduce agroecological to replace harmful practice - Support value addition for non-timber forest products (NTFPs) to reduce pressure on forest resources - Strengthen Community-Based Forest Management e.g. capacity building of Indigenous Peoples and Local Communities (IPLCs) in sustainable resource use. - Encourage intergenerational knowledge transfer on sustainable practices. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Support the organisation of events that promote case studies of collaborative forest management - Create protected areas within the basin - Provide awards to communities who practice sustainable collaborative forest management - Promote Sustainable Livelihood Alternatives e.g <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Introduce agroecological to replace harmful practice - Support value addition for non-timber forest products (NTFPs) to reduce pressure on forest resources - Strengthen Community-Based Forest Management, e.g. capacity building of Indigenous Peoples and Local Communities (IPLCs) in sustainable resource use. - Support co-management agreements between communities and forest authorities (e.g. for moabi trees) - Encourage intergenerational knowledge transfer on sustainable practices.



5. Key Findings, Conclusion and Recommendations

In this study, the following key findings and conclusions were recorded:

Firstly, the intensity of harvesting NTFPs and charcoal collection has increased in both Cameroon and the CAR case.

Secondly, there is a very huge similarity with respect to forest management practices between the two case studies. However, the Development and use a Forest Management Plan (FMP), Climate Smart Agriculture (CSA), Bush Fallowing, REDD+, Collaborative Forest Management (CoFM), Forest Co-management (FCM) and Joint Forest Management (JFM) were peculiar to the CAR case study.

Thirdly, traditional food customs practices have direct effects on collaborative forest management practices and have led to a decrease in forest area in the past 10 years in both the Cameroon and CAR case studies.

It is therefore concluded that the Congo Basin, particularly the forest, is not just a home for these communities, but a way of life for them. However, due to modernization, their way of life especially amongst the younger generation is constantly changing. In addition to this, traditional food customs have both direct and indirect effects on collaborative forest management along the Congo Basin.

5.1. Key recommendations

1. It is recommended to promote Collaborative Forest Management along the Congo Basin as it does not only promote forest conservation and sustainable development, but also involves IPs and LCs in the sustainable management of the forests. Decentralized Forest Management can play a pivotal role.
2. The capacities of IPs and LCs should be built on sustainable forest management along the Congo Basin so as to ensure sustainable management of the forest alongside their livelihoods.



Figure 8: Some Non-timber forest products obtained from the forest.

Table 6: Selected case studies

1. CAMEROON- Fighting poverty through community forestry

Organization(s)	Catholic Relief Services (CRS)
Funding	Highly Indebted Poor Countries (HIPC) Initiative / World Bank and International Monetary Fund
Location	Cameroun, Kadey departement, Batouri commune
Theme	Community forestry, environmental awareness building, participatory management, forest development royal ties, poverty
Contact	Ms. Aurelie Nyapeye Yatchou, Email : nyapeye@cm.caro.crs.org
Link	www.crs.org (June 2009)

**1. CENTRAL AFRICAN REPUBLIC: Inclusive Forest management in the Congo Basin:
The role of community forestry in improving forest and climate governance**

Funding	fern (Making the EU work for People and Forest)
Location	Central African Republic, Ngotto Forest landscape and Mbaéré-Bodingué National Park
Theme	Inclusive forest management in the Congo Basin: The role of community forestry in improving forest and climate governance
Contact	marieange@fern.org , Tel: Tel: +32 2 894 4695
Link	www.fern.org

