Women play a crucial role in forest protection and in food production in rural Central Africa. However, women’s needs and interests are often not sufficiently addressed, due to social and institutional norms. That needs to change. Women should be entitled to their own land and participate in decision-making that concerns them. Tenure security for rural women will improve the socio-economic situation in Central Africa. This is the firm belief of Cécile Ndjebet (48), president of the African Women’s Network for Community Management of Forests (REFACOF).

During our conversation, Ndjebet describes what she calls the socio-cultural reality in rural Central Africa. She tells about the division of roles between men and women, the existing dominance of men over women and why this should change. She shows that equal rights in rural Central Africa are not only in the interest of women themselves, but also in the interest of communities and society as a whole. Ndjebet presents concrete proposals on how best to achieve and secure women’s rights, especially the need to include the words ‘women’ and ‘men’ in the law.

Ndjebet: ‘It is the men that cut trees, it is the women that know their way in the forest to collect fruits, vegetables, mushrooms and other non-timber forest products. To women, the forest is like a mother, it nourishes her children and grandchildren. To men, the forest is business and money. Women are more protective, they think more about tomorrow and future generations. Men tend to think of today and maybe of tomorrow.’

Ndjebet: ‘It is the same in food production in agroforestry and on agricultural lands. Women plant, weed and harvest. If climate change and climate variability reduce the availability of water or harm the growth of crops and reduce harvest quantities, women, because of their experience, can be ingenious to adapt to new circumstances. Women can be a source of knowledge to take effective, necessary measures, including planting

‘Women play a crucial role in forest protection and in food production in rural Central Africa. However, women’s needs and interests are often not sufficiently addressed, due to social and institutional norms. That needs to change. Women should be entitled to their own land and participate in decision-making that concerns them. Tenure security for rural women will improve the socio-economic situation in Central Africa. This is the firm belief of Cécile Ndjebet (48), president of the African Women’s Network for Community Management of Forests (REFACOF).

During our conversation, Ndjebet describes what she calls the socio-cultural reality in rural Central Africa. She tells about the division of roles between men and women, the existing dominance of men over women and why this should change. She shows that equal rights in rural Central Africa are not only in the interest of women themselves, but also in the interest of communities and society as a whole. Ndjebet presents concrete proposals on how best to achieve and secure women’s rights, especially the need to include the words ‘women’ and ‘men’ in the law.

‘It is the men that cut trees, it is the women that know their way in the forest to collect fruits, vegetables, mushrooms and other non-timber forest products. To women, the forest is like a mother, it nourishes her children and grandchildren. To men, the forest is business and money. Women are more protective, they think more about tomorrow and future generations. Men tend to think of today and maybe of tomorrow.’

She continues: ‘Women are more aware of the multiple roles forests play, its biodiversity, its insects which pollinate crops, the water it provides for drinking and irrigation purposes. Women are aware of the value of the forest for the well-being of their communities. They know what a healthy forest is like and if conditions in the forest change, they are among the first to notice. Women could contribute highly to keep forests and the environment healthy. However, the knowledge and experience of women is often ignored, because women do not have ownership of forests and lands and do not take part in decision-making in their communities, in which usually only men take the decisions.’

‘It is the same in food production in agroforestry and on agricultural lands. Women plant, weed and harvest. If climate change and climate variability reduce the availability of water or harm the growth of crops and reduce harvest quantities, women, because of their experience, can be ingenious to adapt to new circumstances. Women can be a source of knowledge to take effective, necessary measures, including planting
other, more climate resilient crop species. Therefore, tenure security for women towards forests and lands as well as gender equality in decision-making are in the interest of all.

‘In the area of commercialization, women are mainly involved in processing products. When they live in enclaved communities without access roads, women stay at home, while the men travel with the products to the markets to sell. In these communities, the men are considered the masters and landlords, and so the women can neither own a piece of forest nor take part in decision-making. In most places in rural Central Africa this is the picture. While 64% to 80% of the people engaged in agriculture in rural areas in Central Africa are women, these women still depend on men for their basic needs.

Can you give an example, I ask Ndjebet. She replies: ‘In Cameroon, where I live, forests are controlled by men. The government owns 95% of the forests, 2% is private property and 3% of the forest territory is owned by families. According to customs and traditions, the man is the head of the family. His wife may work on the forest land, but she does not own it. In the case where her husband dies without a son, her husband’s brother inherits the land and takes it over.’

Ndjebet gives another example: ‘In rural Cameroon, women do not have money to buy land. But if a woman is successful in business and wants to buy a piece of land, she can. Unfortunately, this is very difficult for most of the women in rural areas. If a woman wants to use the land, she can get it from her husband or borrow it from the owner, who is either the municipality or a traditional chief. If the owner says “stop”, the woman has to negoti-
The Rights and Resources Initiative (RRI) supports the developing world’s Indigenous Peoples and local communities in forests and other rural areas, helping them to secure and realize the rights to own, control, and benefit from the natural resources they have depended on for generations. RRI works together with community organizations, civil society, governments, international institutions, and the private sector to promote and accelerate global efforts to improve local livelihoods, reform forest tenure and governance, combat poverty, mitigate the effects of climate change, and deliver sustainable development.

Source: www.rightsandresources.org

REFACOF, the African Women’s Network for Community Management of Forests, established in 2009, is a network created by 45 women from 8 countries in West and Central Africa. On a regional scale, REFACOF is dedicated to the collective action of African women to address social challenges and political, legal and economic issues related to forest management in Africa. REFACOF is part of the network of Women Organizing for Change in Agriculture and Natural Resource Management (WOCAN).

Source: www.wocan.org/content/refacof

Women in the Congo Basin Congo are gradually getting better organized through the creation of women’s networks and platforms that can play a key role in supporting rural women’s capacity building activities. These women’s organizations have the potential to perfectly serve as key implementers of such programs.

Women and men who seek REFACOF’s advice and support can contact:
Website: www.refacof.com
REFACOF President: Mrs Cécile Ndjebet, Cameroon
Email: cecilendjebet28@gmail.com
REFACOF Vice President: Mrs Julie T.B WEAH, Liberia
Email: fcommunityinitiatives@yahoo.com

‘The new policies and laws including customary rules should explicitly use the words “women” and “men” in the formulation, making women’s rights visible.’

Women getting together in the community of Mbiambe, Cameroon.

Tea farmer in Cameroon. PHOTO © BOTH ENDS

Women getting together in the community of Mbiambe, Cameroon.

PHOTO © BOTH ENDS

'term schemes and programs that should be developed within a multi-stakeholder approach, which includes governments, development partners, private sector, donors and civil society organisations.'

Women in the Congo Basin are gradually getting better organized through the creation of women’s networks and platforms that can play a key role in supporting rural women’s capacity building activities. These women’s organizations have the potential to perfectly serve as key implementers of such programs.

Women and men who seek REFACOF’s advice and support can contact:
Website: www.refacof.com
REFACOF President: Mrs Cécile Ndjebet, Cameroon
Email: cecilendjebet28@gmail.com
REFACOF Vice President: Mrs Julie T.B WEAH, Liberia
Email: fcommunityinitiatives@yahoo.com

Women getting together in the community of Mbiambe, Cameroon.

PHOTO © BOTH ENDS

Tea farmer in Cameroon. PHOTO © BOTH ENDS

Women getting together in the community of Mbiambe, Cameroon.

PHOTO © BOTH ENDS

REFACOF

REFACOF, the African Women’s Network for Community Management of Forests, established in 2009, is a network created by 45 women from 8 countries in West and Central Africa. On a regional scale, REFACOF is dedicated to the collective action of African women to address social challenges and political, legal and economic issues related to forest management in Africa. REFACOF is part of the network of Women Organizing for Change in Agriculture and Natural Resource Management (WOCAN).

Source: www.wocan.org/content/refacof

THE RIGHTS AND RESOURCES INITIATIVE RRI

The Rights and Resources Initiative (RRI) supports the developing world’s Indigenous Peoples and local communities in forests and other rural areas, helping them to secure and realize the rights to own, control, and benefit from the natural resources they have depended on for generations. RRI works together with community organizations, civil society, governments, international institutions, and the private sector to promote and accelerate global efforts to improve local livelihoods, reform forest tenure and governance, combat poverty, mitigate the effects of climate change, and deliver sustainable development.

Source: www.rightsandresources.org