

Interview with Cécile Ndjebet, president of REFACOF

‘Securing women’s rights is essential for forest preservation’

by Meindert Brouwer

‘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.’

AWARE 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.’

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



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Cécile Ndjebet,
president of REFACOF



Organic farmer showing her products, Cameroon. PHOTO © BOTH ENDS

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.'

RISK 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-

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ate with her husband, the mayor or the chief. She stands the risk of being thrown out.'

Ndjebet concludes: 'Social transformation is really necessary to redress gender-based inequalities. Land grabbing at the expense of women has to come to a halt. Power and resources should be equally distributed among women and men, giving them both the same opportunities.' And: 'Securing women's rights is essential for forest preservation.'

She observes that 'countries in the Congo Basin have widely recognized women in forest communities as key actors in forest management, biodiversity conservation and the fight against poverty and climate change.' Ndjebet: 'Unfortunately, this recognition is not accompanied by concrete means and resources to improve women's meaningful participation in decision-making, and benefit-sharing, as social, institutional norms, as well as customary and local practices continue to discriminate against women. National policies and laws governing forests and related resources in most of the Congo Basin countries are gender-neutral. They lack statutory mechanisms to ensure women's ownership rights are achieved, protected and secured.'

REFORM Ndjebet: 'There is an urgent need to reform policies and laws governing land, forest and related resources in the Congo Basin countries in order to protect and secure women's tenure, moving from simply usufruct rights to full ownership rights for rural women.'

To secure independence for women in forest communities and in rural areas, what should effectively be incorporated into the national laws? What has to be changed into what? Ndjebet: 'The new policies and laws including customary rules should explicitly use the words "women" and "men" in the formulation, making women's rights visible. The general and very globalizing terms such as "people", "local population", "local communities" and

"indigenous people" used so far, have contributed to the marginalization of women in forest management.'

'The explicit use of the words "women" and "men" in policies will lead to gender-sensitive laws and regulations – which should include customary laws – and to gender equality. This will influence local practices that will be re-modeled. This will gradually improve women's inclusion and effective engagement in the sustainable management of forests and related natural resources. If governments really want to achieve sustainable management of forests, overcome poverty and realize climate change mitigation and adaptation, then policies governing forests, lands and other natural resources in the Congo Basin should make provisions for gender equality.'

What would be your advice to women in forest communities and in rural areas?

Ndjebet: 'From experience, we would really insist on capacity building of women and men. Women should be trained, educated, sensitized, informed, empowered and should get better organized.' Men are important too, Ndjebet underlines: 'If men are well informed and sensitized, they are likely to become strong advocates for women's empowerment. Men are very important strategic partners for REFACOF to achieve gender equality.'

What needs to be done in practice? What kind of training and education are you thinking of? Who could be the actors in this, in Cameroon and elsewhere in the Congo Basin?

Ndjebet: 'Next to training women in leadership and securing rights to forests and lands for rural women, adequate resources should be allocated to women, to support the development of forest-based enterprises on a community level resulting in added value for women's products. In addition, improve women's access to appropriate technology, markets, communication facilities, etc. All that should be translated into long-

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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 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.’

What is your advice to women, in order to play a role in decision-making?

Ndjebet: ‘We need to engage all stakeholders on all levels to achieve women’s full participation. These include local community leaders (men and women) and family heads,

to advocate our cause towards female political leaders within local and national government bodies. We must work with women themselves to build their leadership skills and capacities, build strategic alliances with traditional rulers, local governing authorities (mayors, councilors) and parliamentarians. Finally, we need to establish dialogue and connect rural women to decision makers (men and women) to advance women’s property rights to forest, land and other related resources in the Congo Basin.’

Women and men who seek REFACOF’s advice and support can contact:

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Women getting together in the community of Mbiambe, Cameroon.



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Tea farmer in Cameroon.
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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 organisations, 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