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# Small-holder farmers' access and rights to land: the case of Njombé in the littoral region of Cameroon

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In Cameroon, agriculture constitutes the main livelihood for a large portion of the population. Against this background, land tenure security is of crucial importance for agricultural production and off-farm activities. This article aims to foster understanding of small-holder farmers' access to land in the Njombé-Penja district of Cameroon. Data was collected using focus group discussions with small-holders, key informant interviews, field observations and formal surveys. Results indicate that the current land tenure situation often limits small-holder farmers' access to productive land. This often results in conflicts between various actors including plantation agriculture, rural elites and research institutions, and hence threatens small-holders' security for food and livelihoods. We conclude that there is a need to revisit existing policies for land allocation to multinational companies in order to protect small-holder producers' rights and security, and to harmonize the various tenure systems as a means to avoid competing claims among various actors.

*Key words:* land tenure, small holder, rights, access

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## Introduction and background

In much of rural Africa, land is of crucial importance to economies and societies, and therefore land-based enterprises such as agriculture constitute the main livelihood base for a large portion of the population (Cotula, 2007:3). Land is an economic resource and an important factor in the formation of individual and collective identity, and in the day-to-day organization of social, cultural and religious life (IFAD, 2008:5). Thus, secure access to productive land is critical to the millions of poor people who live in rural areas and depend on agriculture for their livelihoods. Adequate access to land reduces their vulnerability to hunger and poverty, and influences the capacity of the poor to invest in productive activities. Titled ownership of land encourages people to practice sustainable management of natural resources and develop more equitable relations with the rest of their society, thus contributing to justice, peace and sustainable development (Cotula, 2007:3; IFAD, 2008:4).

In Cameroon, as in most other African countries, land access, ownership and rights have been influenced by a mix of former colonial policies and customary practices, as well as post-independence land reforms (IFAD, 2008:6; Puépi, 2010). These include a wide array of overlapping (at times contradictory) rules, laws, customs/traditions, perceptions and regulations that govern how people's rights to use, control and transfer land are exercised (IFAD 2008:6). Cameroon has been beset by a number of conflicting claims regarding rights to land, leading at times, to inter-ethnic conflicts, farmer-pastoralist disputes, loss of property and lives, and the aggravation of poverty in rural areas (Amungwa, 2011:55). The controversy between customary and statutory land rights often culminates in the loss of land rights for the poorest and most vulnerable groups (Puépi, 2010), who compete for land rights with urban elites and large-scale agricultural enterprises/plantations mostly in the coastal regions of Cameroon (e.g. the case of Njombe). Furthermore, the mounting incidence of soil nutrient depletion especially in the Sudano-Sahelian and western zones of Cameroon, coupled with inappropriate land use and management practices such as overgrazing, slash-and-burn farming practices and increased competition over land, tend to diminish small-holder farmers' access to good-quality acreage (ANoRF, 2010). High population growth, food prices and the impact of climate change are increasing the competition for land which in turn threatens land ownership and tenure security. This affects the livelihoods of millions of poor rural people/small-holder farmers who ironically account for over 80% of domestic food production (ANoRF, 2010; IFAD, 2008:4) and yet face regular disputes over access to and ownership of land in Cameroon (USAID, 2010:11). Thus, land tenure security is not only important for agricultural production and the future of the rural masses, it also enables the poor to equitably negotiate their future and build their capacity to undertake viable, alternative off-farm activities. Effective land tenure helps the rural poor to use their land as collateral, renting it out or realizing its true value (IFAD 2008:8). Despite the importance of land tenure and its relevance to rural livelihoods, little is known in the context of Cameroon in general and the Njombe-Penja district in particular, resulting in substantial gaps in knowledge on options to address land-related conflicts.

The research reported in this article aims to shed light on small-holder farmers' access to land by assessing the key land tenure issues including access, rights and conflicts in the Njombe-Penja district of Cameroon. In particular, the study identifies and characterizes the various forms of land tenure prevailing in the study area, the key actors involved and their competing claims. The remaining sections of the article are organized as following. First, we present the conceptual framework used for the analysis. This is followed by the description of methodology for data collection. Next, we present the results and discussions. We conclude the article with some recommendations for policy formulation

## Land tenure studies in Cameroon-literature review

Land tenure is central to the development strategies of communities as well as the organizational structures of political societies (Nguiffo *et al.*, 2009). Bearing in mind its socio-economic significance, it is not surprising that social or ethnic conflicts are occasioned by inequitable access to and control over land (Sone, 2012). Various land tenure studies in Cameroon focus on understanding how colonial and post-colonial land laws have impacted on customary laws and the livelihood of rural communities and indigenous peoples. A general study on the status of customary land tenure in Cameroon by Alden (2010) shows that rural people are deeply insecure with regard to their land rights as Cameroonian law fails to acknowledge that customary land-holding amounts to real property. Thus, the *de jure* reality is that most people living in rural areas in Cameroon are squatters on their own land.

In a bid to understand the impact of historical and contemporary land laws on the land rights of indigenous peoples in the forest zones of Cameroon, Nguiffo *et al.*, (2009) underscore that indigenous forest dwellers are gradually losing their full and complete rights to the land and its resources (by virtue of their customary rights). This seriously affects their everyday choices and prospects such as the extent to which they are prepared to invest in proposed forest management frameworks and ecosystem conservation since access to secure land is widely accepted as a precondition for access to other services and livelihood opportunities (Robiglio *et al.*, 2010:64).

In the grasslands of Cameroon, land tenure studies have focused on understanding land ownership conflicts between farmers and nomads (Sone, 2012), as well as studying attempts to resolve the land/boundary disputes in the areas resulting from disruptive colonial boundaries (Mbah, 2009). In his study, Mbah (2009) observes that even though colonialists made attempts to resolve the land/boundary disputes through an Inter-Tribal Boundaries Settlement Ordinance (ITBSO) which combined Native Court (NC) and administrative procedures in the resolution of boundary disputes, the successive Governments of Cameroon after independence have failed to follow through. This failure has provoked some communities to revisit previous boundary resolutions for political and economic reasons (Mbah, 2009), thereby reviving these land/boundary disputes. Sone (2012), on her part, argues that the recurrent conflicts involving farmers and cattle grazers over land ownership in the grass fields of Cameroon have their roots in colonial policies to promote herding practices (that were more revenue generating) leading to scarcity of land and 'poor' application of statutory laws which guarantees landownership. These resulted in limited usufruct rights of farmers which often prohibit them from using land as a form of collateral security to have access to other resources which may be useful for their livelihoods.

In the coastal regions of Cameroon, land tenure studies have focused on the history and development of the "Bakweri Land Problem". This is a conflict between the indigenous Bakweri ethnic group (of the South West region of Cameroon) and the CDC (Cameroon Development Corporation). Studies show that this problem remains unresolved and the Bakweri people still hold strong claims over the land where CDC plantations are located

(Ngwasiri, 1995; Tande, 2006). To the best of our knowledge, no study has been carried out to investigate the challenges involved in small-holder farmers' access and rights to land in the face of expanding plantation agriculture in the coastal regions of Cameroon. Thus, this study adds to the existing literature on land tenure studies in Cameroon, but is unique in being one of the first land tenure studies in the coastal regions which seeks to understand the effects of plantation agriculture on the livelihoods of small-holder farmers in the area.

## Methods

### *Conceptual framework*

The main conceptual framework used for this study is the Rapid Land Tenure Assessment (RaTA) (Galudra *et al.*, 2010). RaTA is an analytical tool which seeks to provide policy options and interventions as an alternative solution to settle land tenure conflicts, by exploring the competing claims among different actors, who hold different rights and powers. These competing claims are often related to competing or changing land tenure policies, developed in different historical periods and for various purposes. Five main objectives underpin the framework. These include:

- description of the general reading on land use and conflict linkages to a particular context; political, cultural, economic, etc.;
- identification and analysis of actors;
- identification of the various forms of historical and legal claims by actors;
- identification of the institutions and rules governing the management of natural resources and analysis of the linkage of various claims to policy and (customary) land laws;
- determination of policy options/interventions for conflict resolution mechanism.

In order to achieve these objectives, a stepwise analytical framework is used as is shown in Figure 1. This framework has been tried and tested in Indonesia in World Agroforestry Centre-South East Asia projects, ranging from understanding how land tenure claims differ from tree tenure claims to responding to the REDD + plan of climate change mitigation, particularly in dealing with land and resource tenure (Galudra *et al.*, 2010). In Cameroon, within the context of REALU (Reducing Emissions from All Land Uses), the RaTA framework was applied to understand its implications for emission reduction effectiveness in Cameroon landscapes (Robiglio *et al.*, 2010). One must bear in mind that RaTA is not a purely 'scientific' and 'legal' assessment tool; it extensively uses 'citizen perceived legality' and the knowledge of local actors to understand competing land claims. Its advantages include its time-effectiveness, its ease of use and flexibility in combination with other 'legal' approaches, and its ability to foster the development of a relationship between researchers, advocates and local communities (Galudra *et al.*, 2010:16). Unlike other frameworks that only concentrate on existing land tenure systems and general conflicts, the RaTA framework explores competing claims among different actors who hold different rights and powers, as these competing claims are often related to competing or

changing land tenure policies developed in different historical periods and for various purposes. RaTA can provide policy options and intervention as an alternative solution to settle land conflicts. It can also be applied to sites where conflicts have not yet happened, in order to understand the potential impact of implementing a development project on natural resource use and access (Galudra et al., 2010:11-14).

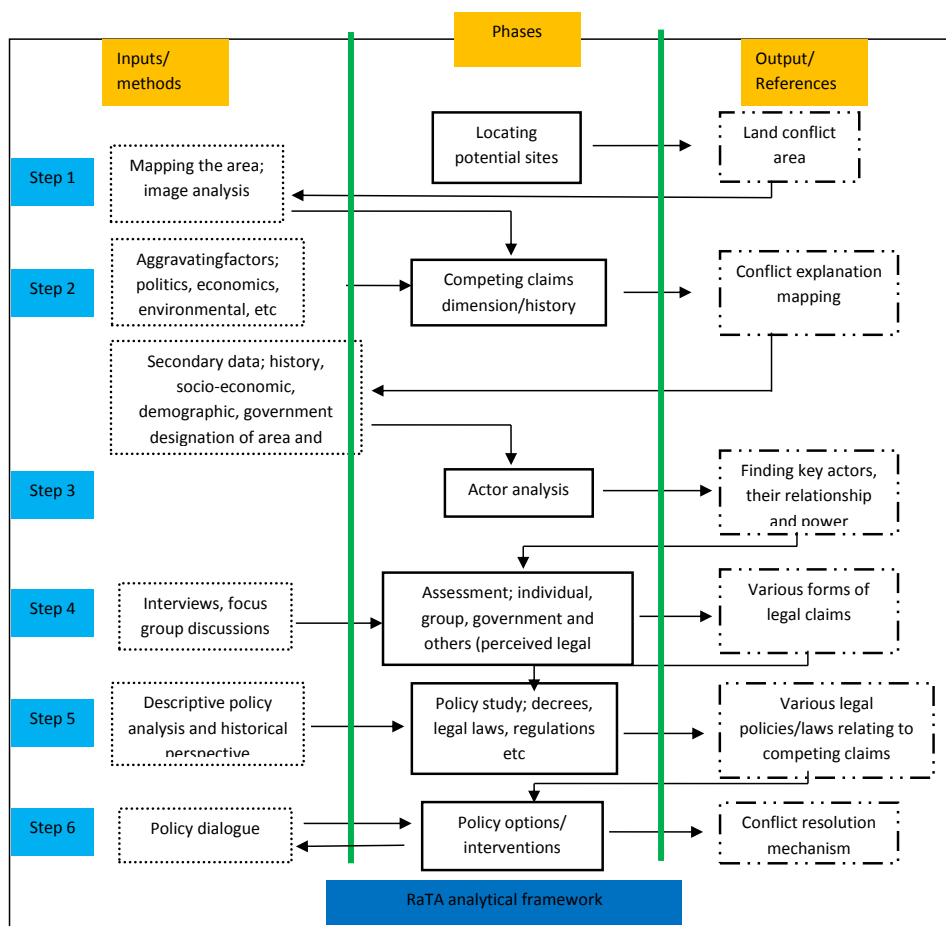


Figure 1. The steps in RaTA analysis (Source: Galudra et al. 2010:14)

### Description of the study area

The study was carried out in Njombé which is a mono-modal humid forest zone in Cameroon. The area was selected because it has many land related conflicts. Furthermore, the area has experienced various forms of colonial regimes and hence has many tenure systems in its history making it suitable for land tenure and conflict analysis.

Njombe is an agricultural community located in the Njombé-Penja sub-division of Mungo division of the Littoral region of Cameroon. It is located between latitudes  $4^{\circ}30' - 4^{\circ}40' \text{ N}$  and longitudes  $9^{\circ}30' - 9^{\circ}45' \text{ E}$  (Azah, 2009:13). The area is bounded to the North by Penja, to the South by Mbanga, to the West by Tombel, and to the East by the Nkam (Figure 2). The climate of the area is equatorial with a long rainy season which runs from March to November and a short dry season which runs from November to February. It is a hot and humid climate with temperatures of  $25\text{--}30^{\circ}\text{C}$  and an average relative humidity of 80%. Cumulative average annual potential evapo-transpiration is 1055.6 mm with annual rainfall averaging about 2550 mm (Thome, 2007). Trees species found in the area as stated by Van de Pol et al., (2005) include Bidou (*Saccaglottis gabonensis*) and Azobe (*Lophira alata*). Due to the high fertility of soils, there has been serious deforestation due to the activities of either large plantations or small farms. The area is made up of a very heterogeneous population, composed of a mixture of tribes including the Bafouns and Bonkengs (indigenes) and the Bamilekes Mbo, Haoussa, Bamoun and other small tribes (non-indigenes/migrants). Immigrants were attracted to the area by the large industrial plantations located in the area as well as by the fertile soils.

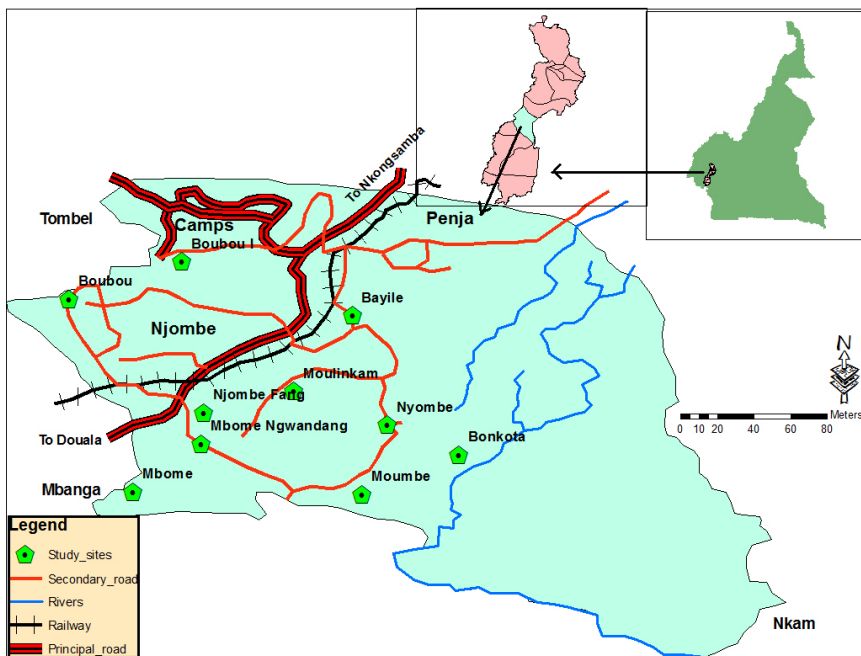


Figure 2. Location of study area (Source: Adapted from Boa, 2007:30)

### Data collection and analysis

This study used a combination of qualitative and quantitative methods including key informant surveys, focus group discussions and semi-structured interviews. Purposive sampling techniques were used to select key informants (including representatives of both customary and administrative institutions), and participants for the focus groups (Katz, 2006; Marshall, 1996:524). To ensure representativeness, participants were selected based on the following criteria: land ownership (land owner, tenants, and intermediaries); gender; origin (indigenous and non-indigenous/migrants;) and age. Fifteen key informant interviews and three focus group discussions were conducted on the following topics: means of accessing land; tenure system used in accessing farmland; rights over accessed land; causes of land tenure conflicts and resolution mechanisms; actors involved in land related conflicts and origin and resolution mechanisms. Methods used to collect information are presented in Table 1.

Objective	Information sought for	Means of data collection
Identify and characterize the various forms of land tenure issues existing in the area	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Forms of rights, ownership and access to land</li> <li>• Acknowledgment of land rights</li> <li>• Tenure system used to access land</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Interview</li> <li>• Questionnaire</li> </ul>
Identify and analyze the actors involved and their competing claims	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Identify actors, their land interest/ competing claims and the relative importance each actor gives to the claims (based on interest, feelings and perceptions)</li> <li>• Actor categories (primary and secondary)</li> <li>• Degree of interaction of actors land interest (based on perceptions)</li> <li>• Existence of conflicts/disputes/ competing claims (causes, origin manifestations and methods of resolution) associated to these</li> <li>• Map out land-related conflict sites</li> <li>• Actors' potential role in influencing land tenure dispute resolution</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Interview of stakeholders and key informants</li> <li>• Focus group discussion</li> <li>• Questionnaires</li> </ul>
Analyze the effects of land tenure systems on land use pattern and livelihoods (based on perceptions)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Preference with regards to land use pattern</li> <li>• Map out the land use pattern of the area</li> <li>• Effects on rural population and small-scale agriculture</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Questionnaire</li> <li>• Focus group discussion</li> <li>• Interview</li> </ul>

Table 1. Study objectives, information sought for and method of data collection



Data collected through focus group discussions and interviews were manually stripped and transcribed respectively, and later separated with respect to the different objectives. In order to obtain quantitative information, semi-structured questionnaires were manually stripped and analysed using SPSS (Statistical Package for Social Sciences) version 17. Statistical analyses used include frequency distribution and chi-square test.

## **Results and discussions**

### *Demographic characteristics of respondents*

Over 29% of the respondents were indigenous people and 70.6% were migrants (31.3% from North West and 68.7% from the West Regions). Immigrants reported that they had been attracted to the area by the job opportunities offered by the large industrial plantations located in the area as well as by the fertile soils which are suitable for agriculture. The movement of people into the area dates back to the colonial period, as people moved into the area either voluntarily or forcefully to work as labourers on German colonial plantations. However, many people migrated to the area in order to seek refuge from the “maquisards” or “rebels” in the Western region during the pre-independence period. Others simply migrated to reunite with family and friends who were already residing in the area. Most of our respondents were between the ages of 31 and 60 years old. More than 80% of the respondents practice agriculture as their main occupation, confirming Boukar’s (2011:v) assertion that agriculture employs more than 60% of Cameroon’s active population. This is also attributed to the fact that Njombé has suitable conditions for agriculture due to the nature of soil and its climate. Agriculture is therefore the livelihood base for most of its inhabitants.

Variable	Number	%
<b>Gender</b>		
Male	41	60.3
Female	27	39.7
<b>Native Origine</b>		
Indigenous people	20	29.4
Non-indigenous (Migrants)	48	70.6
<b>Age</b>		
Young farmers (<30 years)	1	1.5
Middle-aged (31-60 years)	58	85.3
Older (61 years and above)	9	13.2
<b>Level of education</b>		
No education (never been to school)	4	5.9
Primary school	10	14.7
Secondary school	48	70.6
<b>Main occupation</b>		
Agriculture	57	83.8
Contract worker	3	4.4
Service industry	8	11.8

Table 2. Characteristics of respondents

### Method of land acquisition

The main forms of land acquisition are inheritance (39%), rent/lease (32%) purchase (25%), and sharecropping (4%). Renting/leasing depends on the contract terms between the landowner and the tenant. Lease contract varies from seasonal, annual, to biannual, and can be renewable or not. Rent for farmland varies with its accessibility i.e. with its distance from a road (tarmac road) and whether it is an unplanted/empty plot or farmland with crops, particularly cocoa. The rent for leasing an unplanted plot is 12 francs CFA per square metre per annum (a lunar year) if the farm is close to a paved highway or 5 francs CFA if located in the middle of the forest. Farms with crops, particularly cocoa, usually attract higher prices ranging from 20-25 FCFA/M<sup>2</sup>/year depending on their accessibility. There is also a special land renting system in the area known in the local jargon as the “bon” in which a fully cultivated farm with exploitable crops is given as collateral to borrow money for a given time period. During this period, the tenant exploits

the farm in order to recover the money borrowed, and returns the land to its owner at the end of the “bon” period. Land is rented from any individual who has a plot or farm to rent out. It is also rented from research institutions such as IRAD (Institut de la Recherche Agonomique pour le Développement) and CARBAP (Centre Africain des Recherches sur Bananiers et Plantains), as well as agro-industrial plantations (PHP). About 25% of small-scale producers in this area acquire farmland through purchasing. Land is usually purchased with capital accumulated while working in other agricultural as well as non-agricultural activities. Purchase is a legitimate action, giving the buyer full ownership rights over the land. The contract is usually made up in the presence of a village chief, as well as neighbours of the piece of land in question. This is to avoid any future problems such as double sales and overlapping land rights over the land. Land in Njombé is generally purchased from indigenes (the Bafouns and Bonkengs of Njombé).

Twenty-five percent of small-scale farmers acquire farmland through inheritance from their ancestors or a late spouse who could either have appropriated the land as first occupants or bought the land from other landowners. This method of acquiring land also gives its owner full rights over the land. Sharecropping is mainly practised on cocoa farms and occasionally on other perennials but cocoa is usually the base. Two types of sharecropping exist in Njombé: in the first case, the tenant (sharecropper) takes care of the cocoa plants and all other crops associated with it, and shares the net produce with the landowner, i.e. the landowner is entitled only to the proceeds from cocoa sales after the tenant has deducted his/her expenses. In the second case, the landowner pays for expenses involved in taking care of the cocoa, the two will then share the net produce and any other crops harvested from the land after deducting the landowner's expenses.

#### *Tenure system used in accessing land*

In general, 61.8% of small-scale producers' access land under customary tenure and 38.2% under statutory tenure, mostly leases/rents without land titles. This is consistent with Cotula's (2007:5) study suggesting that most resource users across rural Africa gain access to land through local land tenure systems commonly referred to as “Customary Land Law”. The customary system is seen by farmers as a peaceful and affordable means of land acquisition, contrary to the statutory system which is expensive. Furthermore, many farmers are ignorant of the State's land legislations. Thus the denial of “customary Land Law” as private property lies at the heart of land tenure insecurity. This situation is a considerable challenge for small-holder farmers as tenure security is not only important to guarantee continuous agricultural production but it also provides them with the means to equitably negotiate the diversification of their livelihoods and build up their capacity to undertake viable, alternative off-farm activities by using their land as collateral, renting it out or realizing its true value through sale.

### *Rights over land*

Limited land rights (use or control rights) granted to tenants and sharecroppers negatively affect land use by the farmers as they are mostly restricted to the type of crops which they can cultivate on the farms. The landlord or landowner determines what crops should or should not be cultivated on the land rented or leased. Also, these limited land rights negatively affect the farmers' abilities to invest in the land or take advantage of other productive opportunities.

The land rights are sometimes backed by legal documents such as land title, sales agreement and/ or rental contracts. Although a land title is the only legal document recognized by the Cameroon government as proof of land rights as stipulated under Decree No. 76/165 of 27 April 1976 laying down the conditions for obtaining land certificates (ADB, 2009:7), only 8.8% of respondents who had purchased or inherited land actually had land titles. This low rate of land titling in rural areas is very common throughout Cameroon and can be attributed to the expensive and cumbersome nature of the land-titling process (Nguiffo *et al.*, 2009; ADB, 2009:2). This process begins with the landowner filling in a stamped application to the sub-prefect of the jurisdiction where the land is located. Upon receipt of the file and within seventy-two hours, the sub-prefect issues a receipt to the address stated (applicant) therein and passes the application within eight days to the departmental delegation of Land Affairs, who within a period of fifteen days publishes an extract of the request for public scrutiny and objection in case of any. With no opposition, a date is set for acknowledgement of occupation and boundary demarcations by the advisory committee and surveyors sent to the field in the presence of the village chief and other witnesses. Within thirty days after this field visit, the findings of the committee together with the application are forwarded to the provincial delegate of Land Affairs, who assigns a number, examines the regularity of the documents produced and establishes a notice of boundary closure that is published in the bulletin of property and real estate advice (organization and operating procedures are established by a decree of the Prime Minister). From the date of filing the application at the sub-prefecture, until thirty days after the publication in the bulletin of property and real estate advice, any interested person may object. In case of no objection the land conservative registers the documents in the land registrar for the establishment of a title deed. The above processes can be expensive and sometimes provides an avenue for corruption as people often use their position and wealth to speed up or slow down the process. This often discourages small-holder farmers with limited resources from securing land-title. Research by the African Development Bank shows the low rate of land-titling is attributed to the fact that land titles can be revoked and hence do not guarantee permanent ownership (ADB 2009: iv). There is an annulment procedure provided for and this is very often applied (ADB, 2009:10). Although about 60.3% of the population is conscious of the advantages a land title provides, and also agrees that a land title is the most effective method of protecting land rights, 91.2% of these people still rely on customs to protect their land rights based on the sales or rental agreements they possess.

### *Conflict awareness and experience*

About 63% of respondents claimed never to have experienced any land-related disputes. Yet, 81.8% are conscious of the existence and causes of land-related conflicts in the area. Boundary dispute is the most frequent form of land related conflict followed by multiple sale of the same piece of land (Table 3) in the various villages of Njombé. Unauthorized sale of land and expansion of large scale industrial plantations are less common forms of disputes.

Location of respondents	Causes of land disputes					
	Expansion of plantation	Unclear land registry records	Overlapping land rights	Boundary dispute	Multiple sales of same land to different parties	Unauthorised sales of others' land
Bayeli	1	0	2	3	2	0
Bonandam	0	0	0	2	2	0
Mbome-Ngwanda	0	0	2	2	2	0
Mbouale	3	7	9	12	9	1
Moulinkam	1	3	6	8	5	1
Njombé Fang	2	2	3	4	4	0
<b>Total</b>	<b>7</b>	<b>12</b>	<b>22</b>	<b>31</b>	<b>24</b>	<b>2</b>
<b>Percentage (%)</b>	<b>7.1</b>	<b>12.2</b>	<b>22.4</b>	<b>31.6</b>	<b>24.5</b>	<b>2.0</b>

Table 3. Perceived cause of land related conflicts as reported by respondents in Njombé

Approximately 36.8% of respondents admitted having had one or more disputes over their land. The causes of these land disputes include land border disputes, overlapping rights by different parties over the same piece of land and plantation expansion in which people's land is appropriated without compensation (Table 4). Land border disputes and overlapping land rights seem to be the most probable causes of land disputes. This is due to increased pressure on land as every farmer wants more land or wants to acquire farmland by any means.

Location of respondents	Causes of land disputes					
	Expansion of plantation	Unclear land registry records	Overlapping land rights	Boundary dispute	Multiple sales of same land to different parties	Unauthorised sales of others' land
Bayeli	0	0	1	2	0	0
Bonandam	0	0	3	0	0	0
Mbome-Ngwanda	0	0	1	3	0	0
Mbouale	1	0	5	6	0	0
Moulinkam	0	0	3	5	0	0
Njombé Fang	0	0	2	1	0	0
<b>Total</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>15</b>	<b>17</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>0</b>
Percentage (%)	3.0	0.0	45.5	51.5	0.0	0.0

Table 4. Actual causes of land disputes as stated by the respondents in Njombé

#### Conflict origin

Location of respondents	Actors at the origin of Conflicts		
	Small-holder farmers	Plantation owners	Elites
Bayeli	4	0	1
Bonandam	3	0	0
Mbome-Ngwanda	5	0	0
Mbouale	18	5	5
Moulinkam	13	1	3
Njombé Fang	8	2	3
<b>Total</b>	<b>51</b>	<b>8</b>	<b>12</b>
Percentage (%)	71.8	11.3	16.9

Table 5. Actors at the origin of land disputes

Three categories of actors were identified by respondents as the originators of land-related conflicts in the Njombé community. They include: elites, plantation owners and small-holder farmers. Elites who desire land for commercial agriculture (as a source of revenue during their retirement period) use their wealth and power to forcefully acquire vast expanses of land, including the farms of some small-scale producers for the cultivation of predominantly oil palm (*Elaeis* spp). Small-scale farmers, who are poor and politically powerless, are usually left landless, especially if they are not compensated or given alternative farmland. This situation accounted for 16.9% of land-related conflicts in

Njombé. The presence of agro-industrial plantations such as PHP with a surface area of approximately 1250 hectares of land in Njombé (Boa, 2007:29) is another cause of land disputes in the area. While PHP uses large expanses of land for the production of bananas (*Musa spp*), pineapples (*Ananas comosus*), and ornamental flowers for export, their desire to expand their production area directly or indirectly leads to land conflicts. About 11.3% of all land disputes in Njombé directly result from the appropriation of small-holders' land, especially lands which border the big plantations such as PHP, without fair compensation. This leads to disputes between small-holder farmers and plantation owners as each actor is trying to protect his/her land interest. The expansion of PHP indirectly results in land scarcity and increased population pressure on land, due to the influx of migrants to work as plantation labourers. This aggravates the conflict situation of the area. These conflicts, according to the farmers, will continue as long as the plantation is expanding and appropriating their land.

#### *Conflict manifestations and method of resolutions*

Principal forms of conflict manifestations in Njombé are quarrels (55.1%), destruction of farm crops (29.6%), destruction of other properties such as houses (9.2%) and destruction of boundary plants (6.1%). Violent confrontations were generally not observed in Njombé. According to the respondents this is so because land is considered a gift from the “gods” or ancestors and hence no reason to be violent. While quarrels are the most common forms of land dispute amongst small-scale producers, destruction of farm crops, other properties and boundary plants are common between small-scale producers and other stakeholders. Often small-scale producers are victimized when the land dispute involves more powerful actors. Traditional leaders are often used as arbitrators in land dispute resolutions due to their proximity, the respect the people have for their traditional power as guardians/custodians of the land, and for their extensive knowledge of the territory. They are witnesses/signatories to almost all land transactions. They also seem to provide rapid judgment, are less expensive, and strive to preserve peace in the community. Landlord/neighbours of the disputed land, as well as family members and friends, are solicited because they can help to resolve conflicts without incurring financial expenses and also because it preserves the peace and social relationship between the conflicting parties.

As such, 40.4% of respondents use traditional leaders to resolve conflicts over land. This is followed by landlords/neighbours of the disputed land (23.6%) and family members/friends (21.4%). Administrative authorities and forces of law and order such as the law courts and the police are the least solicited due to the high costs involved. However, 9% of respondents choose this method of conflict resolution because they have the legal means and power to re-establish law and order on disputed land. They also believe in the force of the court to maintain peace. Nevertheless, although traditional leaders are highly solicited for in land conflict resolution, land dispute management in Njombé seems less organized as the conflicting parties can directly turn to any of the arbitrators for resolution. The type of arbitrator used depends on the social interests as well as the financial capacity of the conflicting parties.

### *Perceived effects of land tenure on farmers' livelihoods*

#### *Land use pattern of the area*

Land use pattern in the area is a direct effect of the past and therefore how land is used today is determined by how it was used in the past (colonial period). Land in Njombé is used for various purposes including subsistence agriculture, commercial agriculture, experimental trials, plantation agriculture, real estate and other developmental projects. The presence of the agro-industrial plantations in the centre of the town makes access to farmland difficult as small-scale producers are forced to go far into the forest (say about 20 to 25 km from their homes) in search of farmland.

Small-holder farmers' land is either used for subsistence or commercial agriculture. However, this varies with gender, as 82.0% of male farmers use their farmland for commercial agriculture; cultivating crops such as cocoa, palm nuts, pineapples, pawpaw and citrus fruits. Sixty-two percent of female farmers use their farms for subsistence agriculture, cultivating food crops such as maize, groundnuts, leafy vegetables, cassava, sweet potatoes and beans.

#### *Farmers' perceptions of the effects of land tenure system on their livelihoods*

Although small-scale producers account for over 80% of domestic food production (ANoRF, 2010; IFAD, 2008:4), the presence of agro-industrial plantations in the centre of Njombé has some negative consequences on the livelihoods of small-scale producers. For instance, farmers were of the view that the presence of plantations undermines access to and control of resources of the local population now and/or in future, as it takes up the best lands pushing the rural people to cultivate on marginal lands that are hardly productive enough to feed them and secure surplus for market. This therefore affects their rights to adequate living standards and increases their vulnerability to hunger and poverty as they rely heavily on land for their livelihood.

Secondly, farmers were of the view that plantation estates displace local producers (small-holder farmers) who often have the knowledge of producing sustainably, and would be in a position to do so with even higher yields if they were provided with an enabling agricultural policy environment. Furthermore, respondents remarked that their health is threatened as aerial spraying of banana crops leads to air pollution. River water, formerly used by the inhabitants, is now confiscated and used for irrigating plantations. Irrigation channels of these plantations are being emptied into the residential areas leading to water-borne diseases especially during the rainy season. This reduces the farmers' capacity to invest in other productive activities as they say "health is wealth".

### **Conclusion**

This study has revealed that Njombé is an area with great agricultural potential which could play a very important role in poverty reduction and sustainable food production. In spite of this, the presence of agro-industrial plantations, while providing jobs, presents challenges in terms of land access and tenure security to the inhabitants who are often pushed to farm on marginal lands. Large plantations also cause air and water pol-



lution which destabilizes the socio-economic system and the natural environment of the area. The findings from the study provides an opportunity to enhance the peaceful co-existence between private companies involved in large-scale plantations and small-holder farmers who depend on agriculture for their livelihoods. For instance there is the need for the government of Cameroon to revisit existing land policies relating to procedures for the allocation of lands to multinational companies involved in plantation agriculture. The revised policies must protect small-holder farmers' access to land and enhance their sovereignty as many have been pushed to marginal lands which are often less productive and not within easy access to markets. Once these challenges are addressed small-holders will be able to engage in long-term investments on their lands and improve their productivity. Secondly, there is the need to recognise the land rights of indigenous peoples through land reforms that reconcile state laws and customary laws, in order to prevent conflicts arising from competing claims based on different rights. This may include the adoption of laws that promote a land tenure system which protects the land rights of all actors, particularly small-scale producers and rural inhabitants, with a view to achieving food security.

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