

Interview with Cécile Ndjebet – President, REFACOF

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Background

The African Women's Network for Community Management of Forests (Réseau des Femmes Africaines pour la Gestion Communautaire des Forêts, or REFACOF) is a network of women involved in sustainable forest resource management in Africa. REFACOF was formed at the May 2009 International Conference on Forest Tenure, Governance and Enterprise: New Opportunities for West and Central Africa in Yaoundé, Cameroon, where 45 African women delegates first formed the network and developed its founding Declaration. REFACOF's goal is to advocate for governments' and international organizations' inclusion of women-specific needs, constraints and interests, as well as their ownership rights to land and forest resources. REFACOF aims to make concrete, relevant and effective contributions to forest governance in member countries, in order to influence national policies and international frameworks regarding women's rights and tenure.

The following is the transcript of an interview with Cécile Ndjebet, founder and president of REFACOF. This interview took place in October 2011.

1.0 | Since REFACOF is now two years old, it seems like a great time to reflect on its formation. How did the idea to create REFACOF come about, and what were your initial motivations behind forming the network?

At the Yaoundé conference, which was organized by RRI, the International Tropical Timber Organization (ITTO) and its local partners, women representing Central and West African organizations organized side meetings to reflect on the current state of affairs for women in their respective countries? They produced the African Women Declaration, and presented it at the closing ceremony of the conference.

The Declaration illustrates the significant role that women play in forest management and in the broader scope of socioeconomic development in Africa, as well as the main challenges African women face throughout the continent in forest and land management and expectations for future action.

The primary motivation for creating REFACOF was the collective realization that despite varying country conditions, customary tenure regimes and levels of statutory recognition, African women play an essential and very significant role in the broader sphere of development and in the forest sector, and they want to retain this role. Unfortunately, discrimination in access and ownership to land and forest resources causes unnecessary hardship; preventing women from realizing their potential, particularly when this translates to an inability to access capital or market inputs,

effectively preventing women from entering the forest economy and realizing the full value of the timber and non-timber forest products (NTFPs) which they produce.

2.0 | Initially, how did REFACOF plan on addressing gender inequity in forest governance and legal frameworks? Who were its target beneficiaries, and how were its interventions organized for effectively targeting a policy agenda?

The central figures in the REFACOF organizational framework are its national Focal Points, who determine the structure and network systems in their respective countries and analyze how REFACOF can add value to the existing initiatives spearheaded by local organizations. REFACOF's current focal points represent both government agencies and civil society organizations.

As REFACOF's Strategic Plan (2011-2015) shows, our interventions are based on the research carried out by network members, drawing from the reality of the day-to-day lives of women and captured through observation, and interviews, from literature reviews of country and regional legal instruments, and other qualitative and quantitative analyses. REFACOF's target beneficiaries are women, from the community to the national and regional levels; and spanning rural and urban populations. In essence, REFACOF has a multi-faceted strategy for change. Its members address and attempt to reverse gender inequalities in forest governance and legal frameworks through a variety of context-driven approaches, including advocacy and lobbying campaigns, promotional communication, and dissemination of key publications and written works.

Among these diverse approaches, advocacy campaigns are REFACOF's most versatile tool for action, as they can be adapted to various audiences: decision makers at country and regional levels, the donor community, or other regional or global institutions. At the national level, REFACOF will target the local, provincial and federal governments and key policymakers. At the regional level, REFACOF will target institutions such as the Central African Forests Commission (COMIFAC) and the African Development Bank (AfDB).

Our advocacy campaigns rely on our research findings, the terms of which were set forth in our Strategic Plan. Before initiating any advocacy, REFACOF did a literature review and policy analysis of gender and forest and land laws in Cameroon, Liberia, and Burkina Faso. After this analysis was complete, REFACOF organized a peer-review validation workshop, with the participation of network members who validated findings and added substantial input. Afterwards, an advocacy document was jointly developed into an advocacy document meant to draw attention to existing gender gaps and make recommendations on how to mainstream gender into reforms. One example of how this advocacy document was put into action is in Cameroon, where REFACOF presented it to the Ministry of Forestry and Wildlife (MINFOF) and got a verbal commitment from officials that our recommendations would be included in the revision of the 1994 land law. Another example is REFACOF's leadership of the national civil society platform on REDD.

Presently, REFACOF is made up of 14 country member countries: Burkina Faso, Burundi, Cameroon, Central Africa Republic, Chad, Democratic Republic of Congo, Gabon, Ghana, Ivory Coast, Liberia, Mali, Nigeria, Republic of Congo (Congo-Brazzaville), and Senegal. Membership is open to any African woman or women's organization involved in natural resource management.

3.0 | As a network of rural, community-based stakeholders, how does REFACOF facilitate communication both among members and targeted to external audiences?

REFACOF is still in the process of developing an official, network-wide communications strategy. Currently, members use a variety of existing communication channels to promote linkages between a wide range of stakeholders; these channels include, meetings and workshops; newspapers, press releases, radio and TV programming; brochures, policy briefs and letters; and word of mouth, through members and like-minded networks.

4.0 | What are REFACOF's core strategic objectives, and how were these determined?

REFACOF has put forth the following four objectives for the period 2011-2015:

- a. Strengthen the network's institutional capacity
- b. Promote reforms for equitable tenure arrangements
- c. Influence the policy agenda and interventions promoting land and forest tenure at regional, subregional and national levels
- d. Facilitate exchanges among network members

These objectives were formulated during the REFACOF planning workshop organized in September 2010 in Edéa, Cameroon, and developed collectively based on national plans developed by focal points.

5.0 | What is the significance of organizing for women engaged in community forestry under an umbrella network? In other words, why a federation?

The lack of collective action amongst women's organizations has been a pressing issue in forming strategic country and regional level development interventions. The Yaoundé conference presented an opportunity for the women delegates to understand the need for effective organization in order *"to redress the general lack of organization in women's forest management and in community forest enterprise development, and in the African context specifically."* Therefore, *"women committed to act collectively to confront the social, political, legislative and economic challenges surrounding forest management in Africa."*

The writers of the African Women Declaration were convinced that *"given persistent gender inequality in legal, institutional and traditional spheres, in acting collectively women will gain more opportunities within the framework of community forestry and decentralization. Such collective action will enable women to access property and to focus on the promotion of NTFP and agroforestry products."*ⁱ

6.0 | Institutional strengthening is an important priority for any organization in its initial five years. How has REFACOF worked to strengthen itself and define its identity and strategic partnerships, both internally and externally?

REFACOF members are active participants in national reform processes in some countries and attending various international meetings, dialogues and conferences on such REDD, climate change and forest/land tenure. This exposure has helped REFACOF develop relationships with other funding agencies, institutions and organizations. Our hope is to expand interest in REFACOF's ongoing activities among key stakeholders in the field and cultivate these strategic relationships to help REFACOF achieve its five-year plan.

7.0 | REFACOF's strategic plan states its adherence to the objectives and goals of the African Women's Decade and its theme of "gender equality and women's autonomy." How does REFACOF differentiate between these goals? Do you take a holistic approach to gender development that includes male stakeholders, and how is this approach communicated on the ground?

REFACOF's philosophy sees women's autonomy as key to achieving gender equity; likewise, gender equity is a prerequisite for achieving complete autonomy for women. While it is important to invite men and men's organizations to events, and to direct various strategic actions towards male stakeholders, men are not formally engaged in and are not eligible to become members of REFACOF, as REFACOF is by definition a women's network.

8.0 | Do you foresee any strategic opportunities, such as a trend towards decentralized statutory tenure in Central and West Africa, a more robust civil society presence in these countries, and growth in domestic forest and ecosystem services markets, that will allow REFACOF to better fulfill its objectives, benefit more women and their communities, and potentially expand the network's scope?

Many Central and West African governments are engaged in tenure decentralization processes, often in parallel with the increased presence of REDD+ and other climate finance mechanisms. This presents a big opportunity for REFACOF to step into a central role for protection of women's rights within a landscape of shifting resource governance.

Tenure is a key determining factor in whether shifting governance will ultimately benefit or disadvantage local communities, and African governments should make it a top priority – and the basis for any decentralization processes in Central and West Africa. REFACOF's strategic vision and mission makes the network well-placed to be a major, influential stakeholder.

Of course, the actual five-year REFACOF strategic plan is subject to evaluation and if needed, can be adjusted to new dynamics, new trends and emerging challenges. REFACOF should adapt to the demand of its national and regional environments and be permanently poised to come to the fore.

9.0 | What are the major obstacles facing resource-dependent women and their livelihoods in Africa? What new or expanded threats on women's land and forest tenure rights do you predict will become more prominent in the next five to 10 years?

The first threat is from REDD+, if tenure is not secured and social safeguards are not implemented in Africa. Large-scale land grabs have become a significant threat; if tenure is not secured locally, women and men who are dependent on agriculture and forestry – the majority of the population in

much of Africa – will be excluded from political processes and displaced from their lands and livelihoods. The increase in land-grabbing will make women more fragile, poorer, more vulnerable and more prone to become victims of violent conflict than ever before. Finally, lack of access to capital, technology and market is one of the key threats to the economic development of rural communities, particularly women.

The consequences of excluding women when responding to these obstacles are manifold: the continent will see a drastic drop in agricultural production, leading to increasing food insecurity and potential famine throughout the continent. Poverty and displacement will increase, and the continent will see a drastic rise in conflicts over resource ownership and usage.

10.0 | The development of REDD+ for climate change mitigation presents opportunities and dramatic impacts on forest management in Africa as well as implications for decreased tenure security. Is REDD+ an issue you're actively tracking? In its current form, does it present more potential harm than good for women's forest rights? How can REDD+ be further engendered in order to maximize benefits to women, particularly those invested in community-based forest management or smallholder enterprises?

REFACOF should play a strong role in all climate change processes in member countries to ensure women's voices are clearly understood and their interests are secured. REDD+ is one of the major issues that REFACOF is currently tracking. We have to make sure that REDD+ implementation doesn't worsen the situation for women on the ground in Africa, which is why we are advocating for secure tenure rights for women as a prerequisite to REDD+. REFACOF has to inform and train women on the proposed scope and potential limitations of REDD+, particularly of potential negative impacts if social and environmental safeguards are not enforced, and its members must simultaneously advocate governments and the international community to exert pressure for African tenure reforms as a basis for REDD+ project development. If REFACOF is absent and the above actions are not taken, Central and West African women run the risk of further disenfranchisement from climate change mitigation schemes. We must continuously fight for our rights in order to maintain and improve our place and our role.

11.0 | What are the lessons learned from REFACOF's achievements to date that could translate beyond the African context to women and women's organizations with a similar mission in other regions?

In governing REFACOF, I can clearly see how powerful this network has been to local women's organizations that really want to be part of a network. Most women's networks in Africa are dominated by elites who claim to speak on behalf of local communities; here, local women have a voice, and are able to express their views in workshops, trainings, and talking directly to government officials. REFACOF's value lies in its identity as a truly grassroots entity. In addition, REFACOF's unique focus on tenure rights has grounded the network in a common cause and distinguished it from other organizations. We had the foresight to develop a strategic plan in the beginning, which has served us extremely well. Not only has this plan been participatory, with members fully engaged in its development, but it was an effective exercise in helping think through the network's targeted strategy for influence. This can help REFACOF in the future to appeal to donors and avoid losing its way.

Rights and Resources Initiative

Going forward, diversifying REFACOF's governance structure and financial support (with multiple donors) will be essential to its success. Also key for long-term growth is a strategy for membership; existing members must be sure that whoever else is joining REFACOF is aligned with our vision and mission, and can also contribute fully.

The following can transcend boundaries, and apply to any context in which women are working to advocate for equality:

- a. Women have to act collectively, and should organize to achieve maximum influence. Africa is huge, and communication infrastructure sparse, even between villages.
- b. For stability, sustainability and peace, there is a strong need for the entire community to support women.
- c. Securing community tenure is central for women's lives, family and household well-being, and economic development in Africa and beyond.
- d. Women must directly participate in policy reforms, including REDD and climate-change discussions, to ensure their concerns are addressed.
- e. A cross-Africa network of committed women's organizations share important lessons on their success with advocacy in diverse political and geographic forest landscapes and by bringing a collective voice to regional and global forums can have a significant impact on being sure that gender issues are heard and reflected in deliberations and decision-making

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ⁱ The African Women's Network for Community Management of Forests (REFACOF). 2009. International Conference on Forest Tenure, Governance and Enterprise : New Opportunities for Livelihoods and Wealth in Central and West Africa : Declaration of African Women. Yaoundé, Cameroon. Available at http://www.rightsandresources.org/documents/files/doc_1123.pdf.