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Tackling power imbalances and conflicts in forest conservation policies.

Giving a voice to the voiceless in Benin.

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1 Introduction

Benin is a signatory to several Multilateral Environmental Agreements (MEAs), including the so-called Rio Conventions: the UN Convention on Biological Diversity (UNCBD), the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC), and the United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification (UNCCD). Under the latter, Benin has committed itself to restoring 1.25 million hectares of degraded land by 2030 (MCVDD, 2017; UNCCD, 2018) in the context of soaring demand for food by a rapidly growing population (World Population Review, 2024) and the expansion of cash crops, especially cotton.¹ Efforts by successive governments to meet these commitments are often at the expense of the most vulnerable population groups voiceless (Boas et al., 2022; Selby J and Daoust G, 2021), particularly smallholder farmers, who are directly affected by such policies and agreements yet have the least influence over their formation and implementation (Brottrager et al., 2023; Riedel and Bodle, 2018).

This paper analyses how international agreements and related policy instruments influence Benin's environmental policies and affect local communities' rights to land and forest resources. It warns policymakers of the risks of infringing the legitimate rights of forest-dependent communities to land and resources in pursuit of conservation goals.

2 About the research project

A four-year transdisciplinary research project was conducted in Benin, Kenya, Madagascar, and Malawi to support the implementation of UNCCD Decision 26/COP.14 on land tenure². It combined participatory mapping and multi-stakeholder dialogue and analysed the challenges and opportunities of integrating legitimate tenure rights in land degradation neutrality policies at national level.

In Benin, the research focused on the Three Rivers gazetted forest and six adjacent communities. Due to the sensitivity of land issues in Benin, two research assistants worked and interacted with local communities on a permanent basis to build trust and confidence. Despite these efforts, a random sampling method proved difficult to implement. The research followed a purposive sampling method while ensuring representation of the different ethnic groups that constitute the village community (Bariba, Fulani, Gando, etc.). Four-hundred-and-nine farmers were interviewed, of whom 44 percent were women. Nine multi-stakeholder workshops were also organised, reaching over 156 policymakers. At these workshops research findings were discussed, including reflections on forest policies and implementation gaps, as well as alternative policy pathways.

¹ <https://blogs.worldbank.org/en/nasikiliza/hidden-value-benins-forests>

² This decision by the 14th Conference of Parties of the United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification encourages the parties to follow the FAO's voluntary guidelines on the responsible governance of tenure of land, fisheries and forests (VGGT) in the implementation of activities to combat desertification/land degradation and drought and to achieve Land Degradation Neutrality (LDN).

3 The policy issue

Covering an area of almost 1.4 million hectares (DGEFC, 2016) Benin's gazetted forests³ play a key part in the country's commitments to international environmental agreements and to the livelihoods of millions of forest-dependent communities. At approx. 259,300 hectares, Three Rivers is the largest of Benin's gazetted forests. It partially extends across the territories of four communes and contributes directly to the livelihoods of over 107,836 residents of 74 villages and hamlets within the forest (Government of Benin, 2023).

Despite institutional reforms aimed at strengthening conservation policies, the Three Rivers gazetted forest experienced a 5.12% decline in forest cover between 2007 and 2016, mainly due to the expansion of farmland (Government of Benin, 2023). In response, the state introduced new, stricter and top-down regulations. The Benin Forest administration and policy-makers also proposed a series of measures to protect the forests as part of Benin Land Degradation Neutrality Target-Setting Programme (LDN-TSP) (MCVDD, 2017). Some of these explicitly call for a ban on forest-dependent communities accessing forest land for agricultural purposes, and for their removal, including through forced eviction.

»But this political will must be accompanied by a decree strongly reaffirming the prohibition of the installation of farms and other agricultural infrastructures in public forest areas and, at the same time, authorizing the liberation of forests and protected areas of the State from all agricultural infrastructure and occupations.«

Source: Benin LDN-TSP, 2017, page 21

However, such policies may conflict with various UN conventions that require member states to recognise and protect the land rights of forest-dependent communities.

This paper seeks to move the debate on forest conservation in Benin away from an accusatory narrative focused on farm encroachment to one focused on forest governance, including policy implementation gaps and power relationships (Gbedomon et al., 2016; Mudombi-Rusinamhodzi and Thiel, 2020). It aims to contribute to a better alignment of Benin's forest policies with international environmental agreements and to propose new approaches for effectively representing the interests of forest-dependent communities in conservation policies.

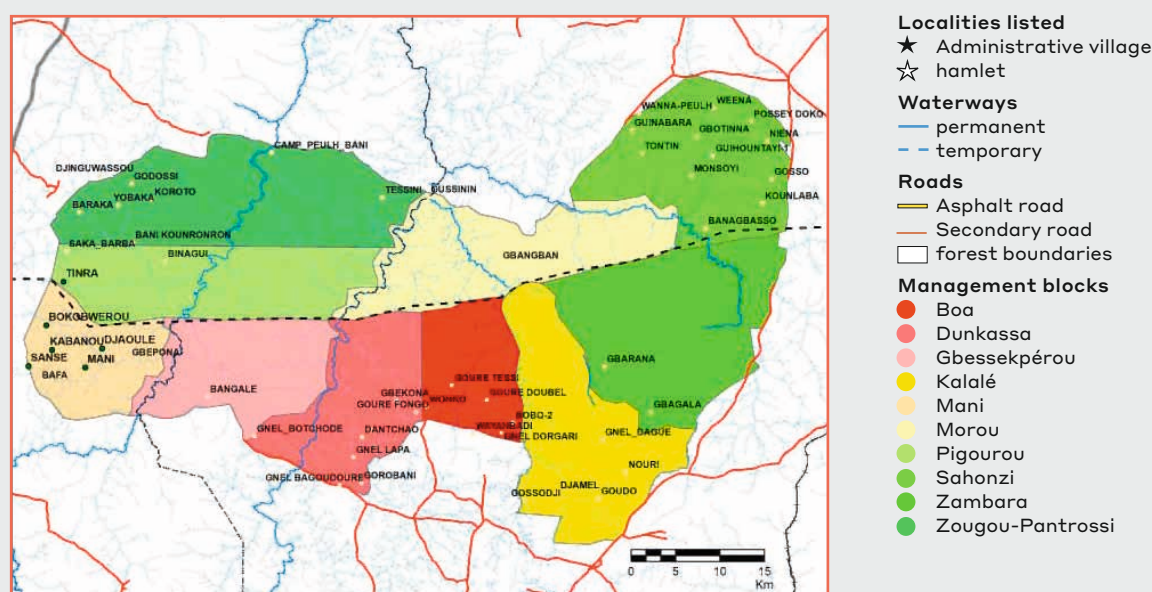


Figure 1 Map of the Three Rivers gazetted forest (source: MCVDD, 2024)

³ Gazetting refers to the process of mapping and legal recognition of a forest by the state. Gazetted forests are reserved and protected under forestry and environmental laws.

⁴ <https://www.unccd.int/land-and-life/land-degradation-neutrality/ldn-principles>

4 Policy implementation gaps

4.1 Weak policies undermine participatory forest management

Since the 1990s, Benin has adopted a range of fundamental policy and institutional reforms, particularly in the forestry sector. The adoption of the [Benin forest code](#) and its [implementing decision n° 96-271 of 2 July 1996](#) paved the way for the development and implementation of participatory forest management plans (PFMP) as institutional frameworks to support the sustainable management of Benin's forests. This marked a significant step towards the inclusion of forest-dependent communities in management decisions⁵.

The **Benin Forest Code** emphasises that participatory management should **(a)** strive to meet the current and future socio-economic, cultural, and ecological needs of the country; **(b)** be implemented in the interest of and with the assistance of the riparian population; **(c)** ensure the preservation of the environment and the long-term conservation of biological diversity. Art.40, Law n°93-009 of 2 July 1993 on the management of forests

National NGOs with expertise in community participation and forest management, in close collaboration with the national forest administration, led Benin's initial attempts at participatory forest management. Based

on the success of pilot projects promoting community management of forest resources⁶, the first participatory forest management plans were developed. Their purpose was to facilitate dialogue and built consensus for the creation of a “collective, integrated ecosystem management system” for forests and adjacent lands⁷. The national forest administration created a new body of forest officers called a technical forest management unit (CTAF),⁸ tasked with the technical execution of forest project-related activities on the ground. While this reform was meant to improve forest governance, it posed two problems for participatory forest governance.

Firstly, the reform removed national NGOs from the implementation of participatory forest management plans, confining them to sporadic training activities such as beekeeping or processing of non-timber forest products (NTFPs). The reform created conditions for the strict implementation of forest policies as the new forest officers were trained to enforce laws and regulations but lacked expertise in social mobilisation or community-based decision-making processes.

Secondly, while the purpose of the reform was to reinforce forest governance and improve conservation, the concentration of management power in the hands of the forest department resulted in greater tenure insecurity among forest-adjacent communities. Seventy-seven percent of the farmers interviewed for this study (n=150) across six adjacent communities of the Three Rivers gazetted forest reported being “very worried” about losing their land in the coming five years (see Fig. 2).

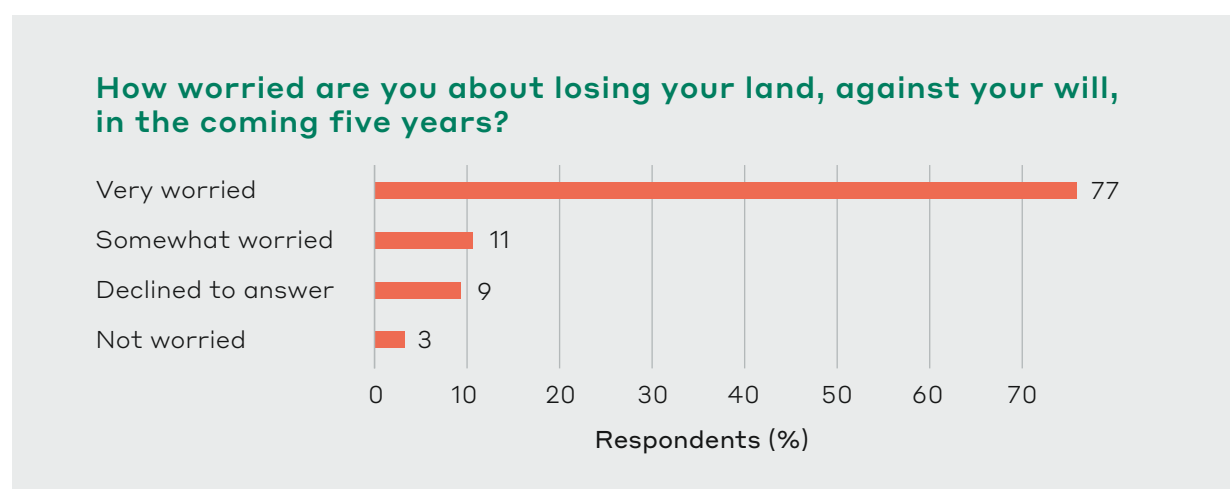


Figure 2 Tenure insecurity faced by communities adjacent to the Three Rivers gazetted forest (field data, April 2021)

⁵ https://www.afdb.org/fileadmin/uploads/afdb/Documents/Project-and-Operations/Benin_-_Approved_Community1_Forest_Management_Support_-_PAGEFCOM_II.pdf

⁶ <https://documents1.worldbank.org/curated/en/364531468743770852/pdf/PID0P069896.pdf>

⁷ <https://documents1.worldbank.org/curated/en/258681542038027710/pdf/Benin-BJ-Forest-Adjacent-Land-Mgmt-Addit-Fin.pdf>

⁸ <https://documents1.worldbank.org/curated/en/272951554467268757/pdf/Project-Information-Documents-Integrated-Safeguards-Data-Sheet-Benin-Gazetted-Forests-Management-Project-P167678.pdf> (page 5)

4.2 Forest governance reforms reinforce power asymmetries and exacerbate tenure insecurity

The institutional reform that placed forest management decisions solely in the hands of forest officers not only compromises participatory principles, it also amplifies power asymmetries and undermines social justice and trust (Catacutan et al., 2021). The reasons given by community members for their fears of losing their land in the coming five years reflected an elevated sense of tenure insecurity and highlighted complex and pronounced power

asymmetries between forest officers and forest-dependent communities. For more than half of respondents, the ability to cultivate crops on the plots of land they have been using for decades depends on the goodwill of the state, which has the power to evict them at any time (see Fig. 3). Nearly 38 percent of respondents expressed worries about being evicted by the government. Note that when Beninese farmers refer to governmental orders, they also mean the forest officers who are charged by the government with protecting the forest.

Reasons given by farmers for worries about losing their land in the coming five years

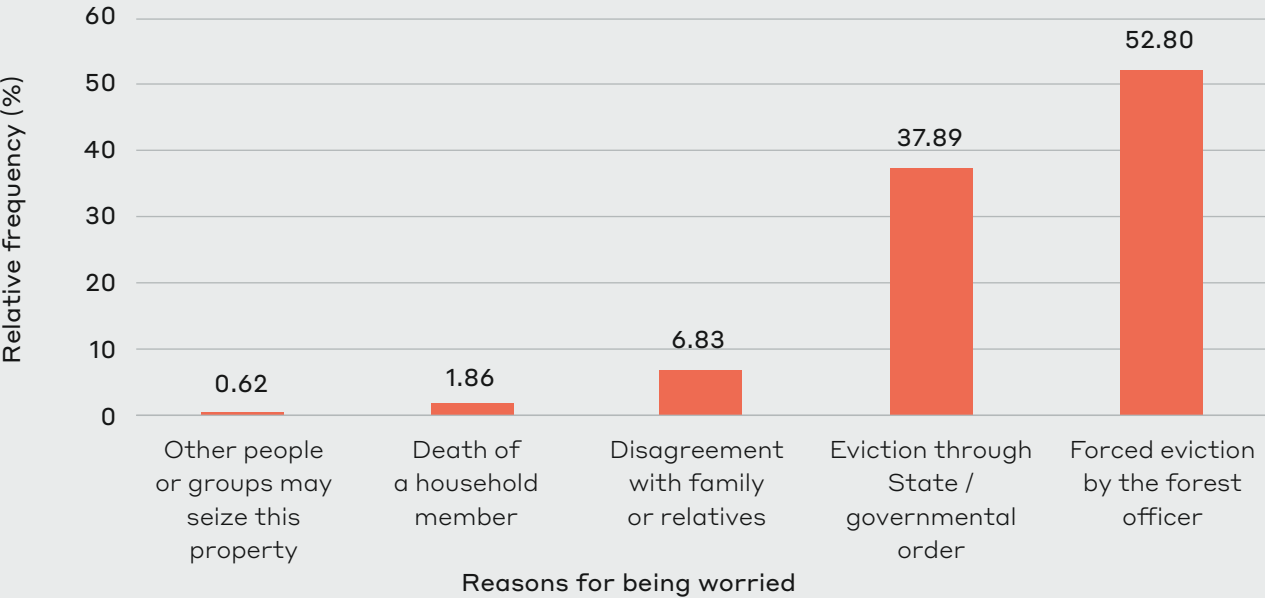


Figure 3 Reasons for the high degree of tenure insecurity expressed by the communities surveyed (n=116)

It appears that not all stakeholders were equally affected by implementation of the participatory forest management plan, due to pronounced power imbalances and socio-economic inequality. Local elites, including politicians and some well-off farmers, have far better opportunities to access land and forest resources. However, most of the local population are deeply impoverished, see their interests marginalised, and encounter numerous coercive measures in the name of forest protection.

Anonymous interviews with several district chiefs and a mayor of one of the adjacent communes of the Three Rivers gazetted forest confirmed that forest management rules are applied differently to influential local elites. In a context where the average farm size varies from one to three hectares, it is not uncommon for elites and influential political leaders to hold plots of land far larger than 10 hectares despite the participatory forest management plan stipulating a maximum of 2.5 hectares per household. In most cases, those elites do not even reside in one of the formally recognized forest-adjacent villages. Unsurprisingly, women farmers are the most affected by such power asymmetries, with nearly half of female respondents farming plots smaller than 1 hectare (see Fig. 4).

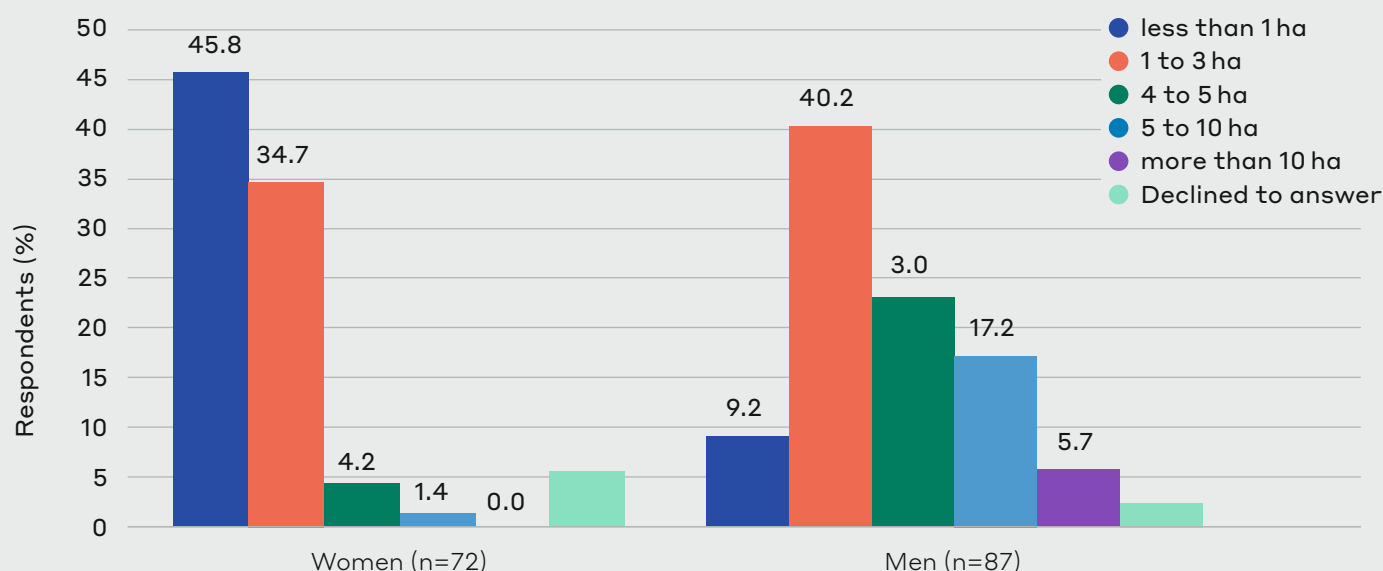


Figure 4 Farm sizes (in hectares) in Kabanou (Source: household survey, April 2021)

4.3 Inconsistencies in policy generate stakeholder conflicts and jeopardise the conservation agenda

As Benin's main export product and source of export earnings (Chabi Simin Najib et al., 2022), cotton has attracted the attention of successive governments and accounts for a large proportion of public investments in agriculture (Hounnou et al., 2024). For decades, cotton production in Benin has evolved in tandem with the cultivated land area (Honfoga et al., 2023), although the current government has invested considerable efforts and resources in improving yields.

To increase export revenues, the government of Benin encouraged cotton production through various economic incentives⁹ without imposing safeguards to prevent the extension of cotton cultivation to protected areas and gazetted forests. Despite an explicit ban on cotton cultivation inside protected areas, the forest officers, afraid to lose their positions or be sanctioned for opposing government policy, remained silent accomplices of forest degradation, preferring to shift the burden onto farmers.

Instead of addressing policy inconsistencies that have contributed to the decline of Benin's forest cover, forest officers often use cotton production as an excuse to impose top-down payment schemes on farmers, ostensibly to implement the provisions of the participatory forest management plan. According to data collected in some of the forest-adjacent communities, many forest officers have allied themselves with large cotton producers, further exacerbating existing social disparities. As a result, the relationship between the local forest officers and the farming communities, especially local farmers and pastoralists, has become tense, leading to frustration and conflict (see Fig. 5).

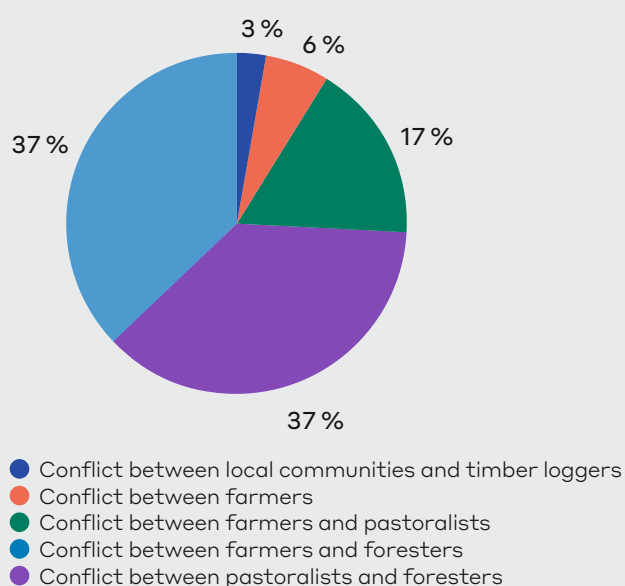


Figure 5 Most frequent conflicts over forest land and resources in Kabanou (Field data, February 2021)

⁹ <https://www.jeuneafrique.com/mag/500750/economie-entreprises/benin-agriculture-la-filiere-coton-reprend-sa-marche-en-avant/>

While forest officers argue that the conflicts are caused by the communities' disregard for the rules and obligations outlined in the participatory forest management plan, the adjacent communities complain that these rules are often applied by forest officers in an arbitrary manner, and that officers frequently impose informal fines as a way to extract money from them. Such diverging narratives reflect the difficulty of conducting constructive dialogue among key stakeholder groups and of safeguarding forest sustainability.

4.4 Failure to recognise and protect the legitimate land use rights of forest-adjacent communities results in protracted policy contestation and stakeholder conflicts in the conservation agenda

To prevent forest-adjacent communities from claiming ownership of forest land, there is a provision in the participatory forest management plan that bans tree planting and, by extension, the implementation of agroforestry practices. Regardless of how long a forest user has lived in and used a particular plot, they are not allowed to plant trees, unless this is initiated by the forest administration. While the ban is understandable and may contribute to preservation of the forest, it also exemplifies a reluctance on the part of the state to recognise and protect communities' legitimate rights to the lands they have been using for long periods of time, in many cases for more than 30 years (see Fig. 6).

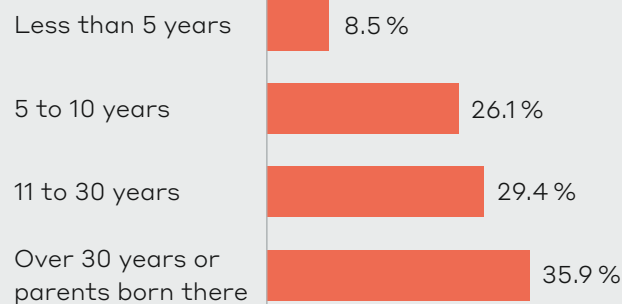


Figure 6 Duration of farmland occupancy in Kabanou (Source: household survey, April 2021)

Another policy inconsistency is the failure to formalise forest-adjacent communities' use rights. Most of the farmers interviewed have no documents to prove tenure rights (see Fig. 7). Although 25 percent claimed to have government-issued titles, further investigation revealed that they were equating the receipts for the forest contribution fees they pay annually with government-issued land titles. Forest officers do not recognise forest contribution receipts as proof of title.

Despite the framework provided by the participatory forest management plan, almost 95 percent of forest-dependent communities have no way to claim use rights. Lack of tenure security not only undermines communities' engagement, it also leads to a higher rate of contestation and conflict as the pressure increases on forest resources due to demography and new settlers, ultimately leading to more forest degradation.

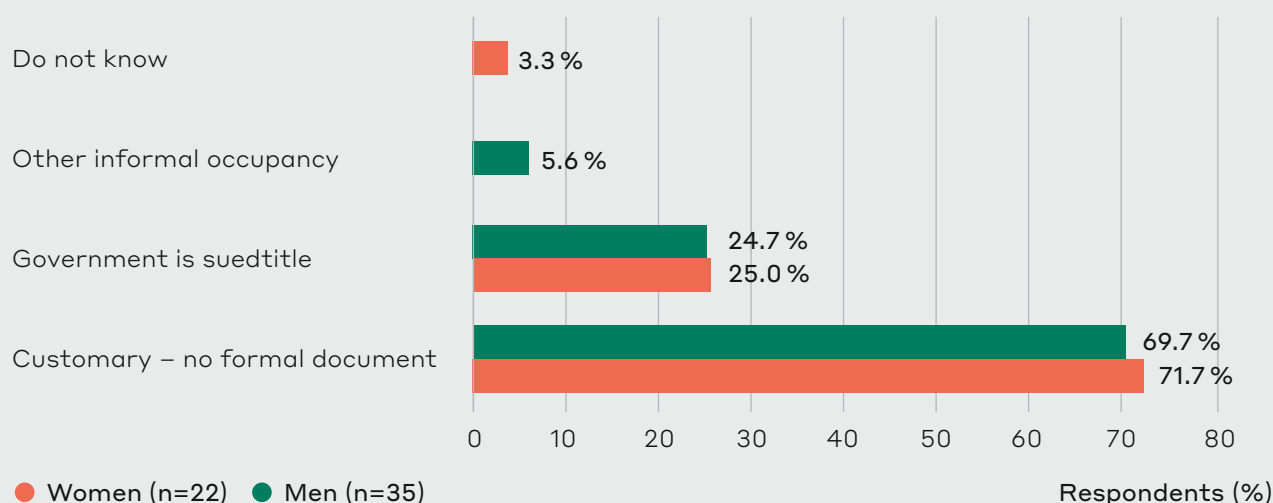


Figure 7 Access mechanisms to land and forest resources in Kabanou (Field data, April 2021)

5 Policy recommendations and opportunities

Message 1: To reduce power asymmetries in forest conservation, it is important to safeguard participatory principles and ensure a clear separation between management and control functions in forest governance.

Benin's current efforts to sustain its forests are undermined by past policy reforms that concentrate forest management and control functions in the hands of forest officers (CTAFs). This represents a setback to progress in improving public governance. The forest sector can learn from the agriculture sector where a ministerial decree¹⁰ from 1996 enforces a clear separation between the control and regulation functions assigned to the Ministry of Agriculture and its decentralised bodies with implementation and management activities entrusted to the Territorial Agencies for Agricultural Development (French acronym ATDA). Failure to promote inclusive and participatory approaches in forest management will reinforce the impression that the initial commitments to participatory approaches mainly served to advance government strategies of rent capture and blame avoidance (Andong and Ongolo, 2020; Ongolo et al., 2021).

»Protect human rights and enhance human well-being: Actions taken in pursuit of LDN should not compromise the rights of land users (especially small-scale farmers and indigenous populations). These actions should support livelihoods, and should not diminish the productive capacity or cultural value of the land.«

Land Degradation Neutrality implementation principle 2

Message 2: Adopting a rights-based approach to forest conservation is a key pillar in addressing inequalities and reinforcing social cohesion.

Success in reconciling global and national environmental agendas with the growing demand for food and land will depend on the Beninese government's willingness and capacity to adopt and implement rights-based policies¹¹, including mechanisms to reduce existing inequalities in accessing land and forest resources. Failure to recognise and protect the legitimate use rights of forest-adjacent communities can lead to protracted policy contestations and stakeholder conflicts in the conservation agenda (Boyd and Keene, 2021; Holland et al., 2022) (Boyd and Keene, 2021; Holland et al., 2022).

Over a hundred countries, including Benin, have adopted UNCCD Decision 26/COP.14 on land tenure, and the three Rio Conventions consistently push to recognise and protect the rights of Indigenous and local communities in climate¹², biodiversity, and land restoration programmes¹³. This is a clear avenue to changing outdated policy mechanisms for efficient and inclusive forest governance systems. Likewise, the ongoing revision of the Benin LDN-TSP 2 is an opportunity to ensure that the principles of LDN are translated into clear policy mechanisms at the national and local levels.

¹⁰ <https://faolex.fao.org/docs/pdf/Ben174002.pdf>

¹¹ <https://www.unccd.int/news-stories/stories/land-rights-key-sustainable-prosperity>

¹² <https://icipp.unfccc.int/rights-safeguards-and-protocols>

¹³ <https://www.tmg-thinktank.com/blog/unlocking-synergies-for-womens-land-rights-bridging-rio-conventions-with>

Message 3: In implementing participatory forest management plans, it is critical to uphold trustworthy collaboration, safeguard grievance redress mechanisms, and ensure that the use rights of vulnerable communities are protected.

Perceived tenure insecurity is a strong impediment to investment in SLM and forest protection (Rakotonarivo et al., 2023; Swallow, 2021)

Despite the opportunity participatory forest management plans offer for inclusive forest management, various forms of distrust and conflict affect implementation on the ground, limit farmers' engagement in conservation actions, and exacerbate forest tenure insecurity (Gandji et al., 2017; Kora et al., 2025). Within Benin's gazetted forests, the state has the right to regulate access and to mandate the withdrawal, management, exclusion, and alienation of land and forest resources, with limited decision-making by other stakeholder groups. The criminalisation of 'unauthorized' access to forest land and resources by adjacent communities, along with the lack of grievance redress mechanisms – even for demands they view as abusive – jeopardises trustful collaboration and exacerbates feelings of insecurity.

The recent revision of the participatory forest management plan provides a unique opportunity to address previous shortcomings in policy implementation and implement mechanisms to reduce social inequalities and balance decision-making power with key stakeholder groups. The recent rise of violent extremism in the Sahel and the use of forests as a refuge by terrorist organisations makes an additional argument for implementing forest reforms that support trust-building and collective action as a foundation for social cohesion, conflict prevention, and sustainable management of forest resources.

Conclusion

Responsible land governance is critical to protecting forest ecosystems and reconciling conservation goals and local communities' legitimate rights to food and security. Shifting responsibility for forest degradation onto farmers and their practices without analysing the role of government policy dichotomies in the observed issues is counter-productive and undermines both social stability and conservation. Acknowledging those governance issues and policy dichotomies is a crucial step towards the development of better and more effective reforms and policies. Recognising that the current state of management of the forest resources has major sustainability limitations is critical in setting new alternatives and reconciling forest conservation goals and development priorities with the livelihood needs of dependent communities.

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