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Article

Rethinking Institutional Knowledge for Community Participation in Co-Management

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Abstract: Critics of participation often examine the undesirable consequences of state-led systems without much analysis of institutional knowledge at the local level. In this paper, we investigate whether smaller institutions could offer useful knowledge for meeting the development needs of local people. Using participation theory and related literature on development and power, we investigate a co-management system in communities around Mount Cameroon National Park (MCNP), in sub-Saharan West Africa. Our study adopts a multimethod approach to survey officials in 16 agencies and locals in 17 village groups. The findings indicate factors that hinder the effectiveness of local participation and avenues by which institutional knowledge can be customized to meet local development priorities. This system of participation, we conclude, could work better through open dialogue that is explicitly accountable and transparent.

Keywords: co-management; institutional knowledge; sustainability; paradox; community participation; development and power; Mount Cameroon National Park; Sub-Saharan West Africa

1. Introduction

In the past few decades, community participation has become an important concept in advocating for the needs of local people, i.e., individuals who exist in and belong to an area where they live permanently, when making decisions for the collaborative management of natural resources. Here, “community” refers to a local unit of social organization that retains an important role in society despite its reliance upon larger units [1]. In community research, scholars use the concepts of ‘community’ and ‘participation’ to identify processes for engaging actors to undertake responsible roles in society [2]. These processes could include groups representing a large number of persons [3], as well as democratic measures that engage citizens [4,5]. Considering that participation should enable local communities and stakeholders to work together in planning for the sustainable management of natural resources [6,7], applying participatory processes in local communities has met with significant challenges over the last two decades. In this paper, we use examples from Cameroon to examine why a co-management system involves difficulties pertaining to participation and ask whether we can build on the knowledge of institutions that exist within this system.

We consider the period between the 1940s and 1980s, when colonial and postcolonial regimes had protectionist approaches to conservation in Africa that, over time, faced opposition due to the negative consequences on local communities [8]. Cameroon, for example, following its commitment to structural adjustment programs (SAP) in the 1980s, began rationalizing its forestry and agricultural sectors to promote the sustainable development of natural resources and economic growth [9]. This became a drive for regulating protected areas in Cameroon by involving local communities. Some of these

protected areas, such as the Mount Cameroon National Park (MCNP), have been for many generations a source of livelihood for people living in and around forested areas. See the example of the Bakweri and the land problem [10]: A group that currently resides at the fringes of MCNP following a history of land displacement. Such areas face challenges with getting people to work together in making decisions about land use. In the subsequent parts of this paper, we revisit this paradox through the lens of a co-managed (collaborative management) system among MCNP communities.

The above critique of participation is not new. In 1981, some of the world-leading conservation agencies, like the World Wildlife Fund (WWF), the Food and Agricultural Organization (FAO), and the United Nations Environmental Program (UNEP), ratified the World Conservation Strategy to sustain ecosystems through the active involvement of local people [11]. Despite this agreement, there are significant problems in communities that rely on natural resources for a living [9,12–14]. For the most part, local communities, in spite of their engagement in development programs, have experienced a reduction in their ability to influence decisions in participatory systems [12]. This is partly due to bureaucratically determined management regulations that detach people from culturally valuable natural resources in the pursuit of increasing income per capita, wage labor, agricultural productivity, and marketization [13–15]. Failure to address such bureaucracy in the establishment of management regulations means there is little space for recognizing local input in decision-making.

Regarding the unintended outcomes of participation, critical studies in recent decades have analyzed participation from the perspectives of development [3,16] and power [17–19]. Hickey and Mohan [3], for instance, studied how participatory development, a practice that should engage marginalized groups with issues of power, technically failed by depoliticizing what should be politically explicit, as can be seen in state-led participatory development. Furthermore, the sharing of power between institutions and local people determines the relationship between actors in the system of participation. Here, the critical basis for power includes ‘spaces’ for community participation spatially bounded in ways that define ‘empowerment’ according to the institution’s own making. In effect, this deviates from the perceptions that local people have about empowerment and subjects them to power structures that they are unable to question [19]. See the example of a REDD+ (reducing emissions from deforestation and forest degradation) initiative in Tanzania where local participation was reinforced by structures that led to power differentials between actors [18]. The colonial appropriation of urban wetlands in Colombo, Sri Lanka, also depicts this power imbalance [20].

Critics of participation and related practices have broadly focused on the radical politics of development and power, where inequalities of participation exist within communities [3,12–14,16,18,19]. This scholarship, however, does not give much attention to the way in which institutional action at local levels of society can be used to promote local knowledge in decisions within participatory systems. Some studies, though, suggest the potential of nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) to assist communities based on gaining the trust of local people and mobilizing financial and political resources [21,22]. Moreover, scholars have argued that the extent of the work of smaller conservation NGOs is not entirely known in the development sector [23]. They further propose that understanding how participation occurs in various structures of power and political systems will bring about new ideas for establishing transformative approaches of participation [3].

To advance the above lines of thinking, we need to understand the institutional capacity for action that could give communities a voice in participatory systems. Consistent with the views of Hosli and Dörfler [24], we define an institution’s capacity to act as a process that necessitates abstracting from the preferences of local people and adapting such preferences to accountable structures of power. Doing so requires an assessment of smaller institutions, their role in participatory systems, and the opinions that local people have about collaborating with such institutions. In this study, we define smaller institutions as those units operating at local levels of society. Meanwhile, ‘knowledge’ is a dynamic concept with several definitions; however, in participatory development, it is defined as knowledge that is culturally and ecologically situated, shared, geared to real-life practices, and acquired to respond to social and natural environments that are constantly changing [25]. Using the example of

a co-management system for MCNP, this paper aims: (a) to identify the legal basis for institutional and local participation, (b) to determine the paradox of the system and the concerns that local people have about participating in the system, and (c) to suggest how institutions can better acknowledge the development needs of local people in co-management. The conclusions of this study suggest that augmenting local participation in co-management can be possible if grounded upon a nuanced analysis and identification of institutional knowledge for action that can favorably respond to the development needs of local people.

2. Developments towards Participation in Cameroon

The participatory system of co-management in Cameroon cannot be examined without a review of neoliberal developments, i.e., state-led processes that prioritize systems of competition, price mechanisms, and free enterprise, in the postcolonial history of Cameroon and the subsequent legal frameworks introduced preceding the creation of MCNP. Shortly after Cameroon's independence in 1960, the country had budgetary deficits due to a drop in oil and petroleum prices. This led to a decline in the export trade [9] (p. 39). In the late 1980s, growing foreign indebtedness compelled the Cameroonian government to negotiate with the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Bank under structural adjustment programs (SAP). These programs consisted of reforms for economic recovery, between 1988 and 1994, including measures to restructure the forest and agricultural sectors of Cameroon. For the forest sector, in 1993, the World Bank recommended the rationalization of forests in grassroots communities towards the sustainable management of natural resources. Thereafter, the government ratified a state forestry and wildlife law in 1994, as a commitment to SAP [9] (p. 94). This law created permanent forests (forested areas that are by law excluded from other use than for forestry) on 30% of the country's territory. These forests were equally multipurposed for protected areas, timber exploitation, farming, and pasture. The implementation of this law meant participation with local people who rely on such forests, considering that many communities are located in areas used by timber operators.

For the agricultural sector, participatory schemes for the sustainable management of natural resources led to internalized neoliberal norms among locals as such schemes were aimed at providing communities with alternative means of livelihoods. In the 1990s, the government introduced two SAP initiatives. These included Financing and Investment in Agriculture and Community Micro-projects (FIMAC) and the *Programme National de Vulgarisation et de Recherche Agricoles* (PNVRA). While FIMAC targeted the promotion of rural participation in socioeconomic development, PNVRA aimed at raising agricultural productivity and improved access to technology among farming communities [9]; [26] (pp. 213–215). Through these initiatives, local organizations received loans for community development projects in all 10 regions of Cameroon. Consequently, when SAP liberalized reforms for cocoa in the 1990s, it led to the extension of land for cultivating crops. Furthermore, this mode of participation incited counterproductive conditions in rural communities [27] (p.18). In other words, while loan schemes for participatory development offered technological advancements to boost agricultural production among locals, it became difficult to transport farm produce due to insufficient infrastructure.

2.1. Study Area and Political Organization

Mount Cameroon National Park (MCNP) is located in the southwest of Cameroon at latitude 4°13' N and longitude 9°10' E. There are 41 villages around MCNP, with the population estimated at 100,000 (Figure 1). MCNP has a surface area of 58,178 hectares (ha), comprising four cluster zones: Buea cluster (20,553.83 ha) southeast of MCNP, Muyuka cluster (6291.73 ha) to the east, Bomboko cluster (12,963.43 ha) in the northwest, and the West Coast cluster (18,369.03 ha) on the western side of MCNP. Volcanic soil and annual precipitation rates of up to 10,000 mm on the western slopes of MCNP influence the rich biodiversity.

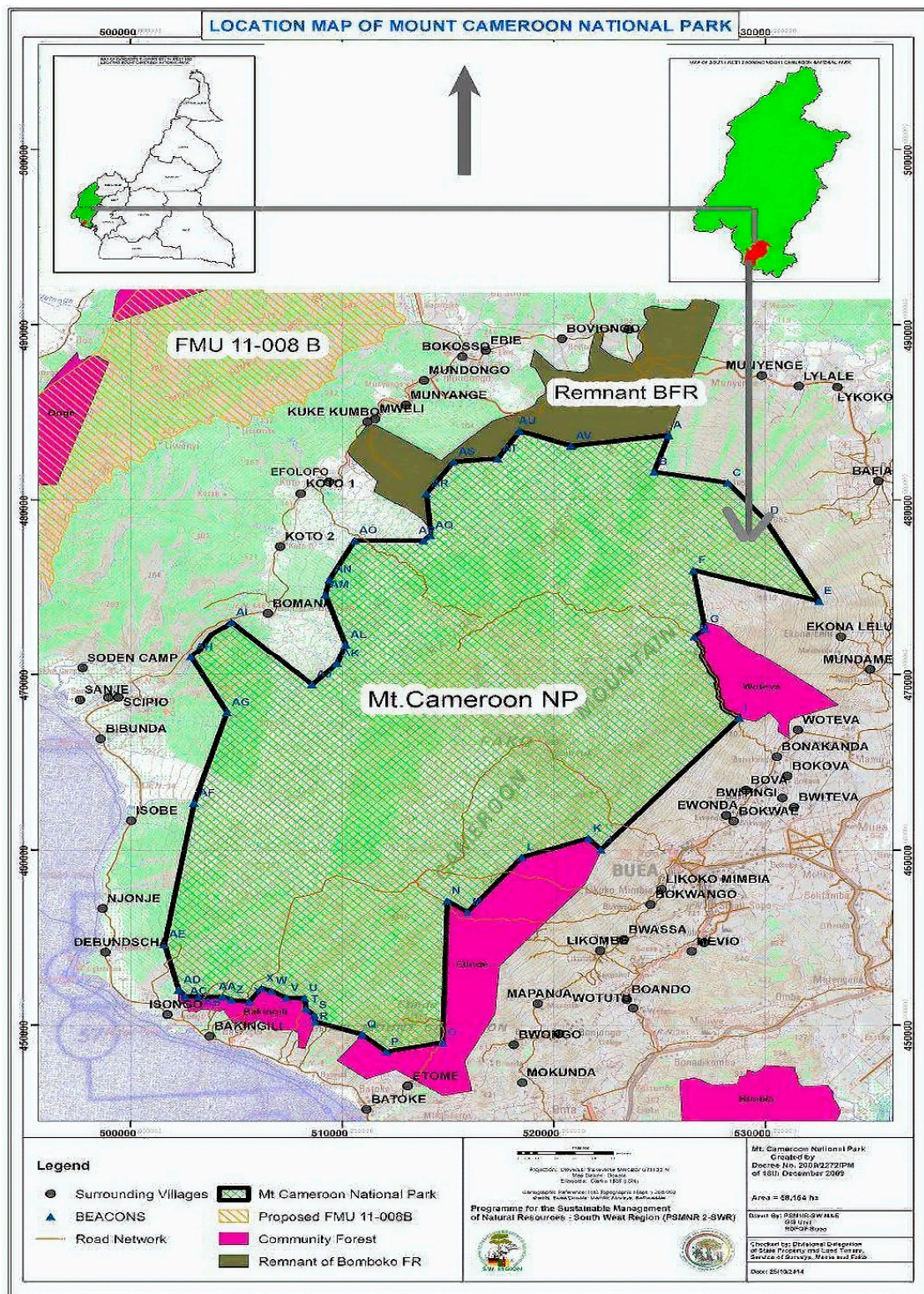


Figure 1. MCNP and surrounding communities. Authors’ field data, adapted from the MCNP Service (2017).

In terms of human settlement, the Bakweri is one of the most known early settler groups in the Mount Cameroon area. For many generations, they have relied on the forest for hunting, trapping, and gathering forest products. Nowadays, a heterogeneous population structure exists with 20th-century migrants from other regions of Cameroon, including the Bali, Wum, Kom, and Essimbi,

among other groups. The rainy season lasts from March to October, and the dry season from November to February.

For this reason, locals cultivate crops such as potatoes, cassava, plantains, and cocoyams for household and commercial purposes. Cocoa is a common cash crop cultivated in Bomboko and Muyuka with the support of participatory development schemes, and accounts for approximately 50% of agricultural income. The locals benefit from other activities like animal trapping, harvesting timber, and wild honey. Tree species like bamboo, mahogany, White Afara, and Iroko are visible in all cluster zones of MCNP. Although Christianity is becoming the dominant religion in MCNP villages, traditional beliefs endure through practices of worshiping deities and ancestral spirits as guardians of the land. These activities are reflected in the socioeconomic characteristics of the study communities (Table 1).

Table 1. Socioeconomic characteristics of the study communities. Authors' field data adapted from agro-socio-ecological assessment (ASEA) reports 2012–2015 of the MCNP Service (2017).

MCNP Cluster Zone	Village Community	Population	Economic Activities	Dependence on Forest
Buea	Bonakanda	1000–1500	Farming of cocoyams, plantains, potatoes, and cassava	Timber harvesting, Bee keeping, and animal trapping
West Coast	Lower Boando	500	Fishing and the sale of fish Palm nut farming, harvesting, and sales Extraction and sale of oil palm	Timber and bamboo harvesting Bee keeping
	Batoke	>2000		
	Bakingili	>2000		
	Njonje	<1000		
	Bibunde	>2000		
	Sanje	500–1000		
Muyuka	Lykoko Munyenge	>2000 >2000	Fuel wood sales; rearing goats, fowls, and pigs The sale of honey	Timber and bamboo harvesting, bee keeping
Bomboko	Bomana	1000–1500	Cocoa cultivation and sales; farming corn, cocoyam, plantains, and cassava Rearing cows and goats	Animal trapping, timber harvesting Harvesting of medicinal plants The use of caves for spiritual needs
	Big Koto I	1000–1500		
	Efolofo	500–1000		
	Kuke Kumbo	1000–1500		
	Munyange	500–1000		
	Mundongo	500–1000		
	Bova	>2000		
Bomboko	>2000			
	Boviongo	500		

In terms of the political organizational structure, areas that would come to be on the periphery of MCNP following Cameroon's independence in 1960, and an integral part of participation in co-management, include the subdivisional areas of Buea, Limbe, Idenau, Muyuka, and Mbonge, in the southwest of Cameroon. A governor administers these areas regionally. Under the governor, the territory is governed by three levels of administration:

- Subdivisional councils led by mayors corresponding to all five subareas.
- Within the subdivisions are villages led by chiefs who are responsible for dispute settlement, organizing traditional ceremonies, and codifying customary law.
- The MCNP Service leads the development and co-management of MCNP, including adjacent villages, in collaboration with partner organizations.

2.2. Legalities for Institutional Participation in Communities

Participation between adjacent communities and institutions in the co-management of MCNP is formalized by two major legalities.

- Laws for the participation of local communities and co-management institutions (subdivisional councils, NGOs, and state organs).
- The 2014 co-management plan for MCNP and the participation of locals and partner agencies.

Section 72 of Law No. 94/01 of 20 January 1994 approves the participation of indigenous peoples in environmental management through free access to environmental information and involvement in the use of land resources. It, however, lacks a decree for the full respect of customary rights. In Cameroon, the term ‘indigenous peoples’ is used to describe groups with a distinctive culture and connection to ancestral lands. It is also subjective and contested as to whether and how a group identifies itself by a common ancestor and place of heritage. The Ministry of Environment and Forestry (MINEF), a unit of the government, ensures this means of indigenous involvement. Article 8 of section 1 of the 1994 state forestry law entitles every inhabitant of a forest zone to usage rights. While this law excludes protected animal species from usage rights, it allows locals to gather nontimber forest products for personal use, while prohibiting any commercial use. However, the law permits locals to access community forests outside of MCNP boundaries for agriculture, livestock farming, and the hunting of unprotected animals specified by the 1994 state law [28].

Law No. 99/014 of 22 December 1999 and Law No. 90/053 of 19 December 1990 legalize the participation of NGOs and state organizations in activities of environmental protection [28]. For instance, between 1994 and 2003, an initiative (Mount Cameroon Project) by the *Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit* (GIZ) and the Cameroon government helped locals generate revenue from forest resources (such as wild honey and *Prunus africana*) other than protected species, while maintaining the ecological value of the forest [29]. In 2004, the *Ministère des Forêts et de la Faune* (MINFOF) and the Ministry of Environment and Nature Protection (MINEP) replaced MINEF. The government placed activities related to the management of national parks in Cameroon under the responsibility of MINFOF’s department for wildlife and protected areas. By 2009, the Cameroon government introduced development plans known as Cameroon Vision 2035 and 2009 Growth and Employment Strategy Paper 2010-2020 that called for the commitment of government agencies, NGOs, and local communities, to protect and ensure the sustainable management of forest ecosystems [30]. To attain these visions, MINEP implements REDD+ initiatives in communities around Mount Cameroon.

The participation of subdivisional councils in MCNP villages was legalized by the 1996 and 2004 Cameroon laws on decentralization. These laws approved the transfer of central powers to local entities, assigned in areas of interest including health care, education, culture, and economic development. Specifically, Law No. 2004/017 of July 22 on the orientation of decentralization and Law No. 2004/018 of July 22, laying down rules applicable to councils, outline the above visions [31]. In 2005, the government of Cameroon created a National Program for Participatory Development (PNPD) under the *Ministère de l’Economie, de la Planification et de l’Aménagement du Territoire* (MINEPAT). This institution assists the state by helping subdivisional councils apply decentralized financing of projects for community development in rural areas of Cameroon [32].

2.3. Co-Management Framework

The Cameroon government created MCNP in 2009 to promote the conservation of biodiversity and the sustainable management of natural resources. To ensure the inclusion of local people in this process, Ministerial decision No. 0385/MINFOF/SG/DFAP of 12 August 2014 established a co-management plan that formalized the participation between the MCNP Service, partner institutions, and locals in peripheral villages. This plan, in particular, made it legal for stakeholders from divisional, subdivisional, regional, and national levels of society to be involved in the co-management of MCNP. Moreover, it convened a technical committee for elaborating management plans developed to last from 2015 to 2019, renewable after assessments of the plan. Implementing co-management in communities comes with the active role of functional units of the MCNP Service, an agency led by a conservator who coordinates park planning and management. These units include finance and administration, production unit, collaborative management unit, research and monitoring, and ecotourism development. By means of a program for sustainable management of natural resources in the southwest region, co-management is funded partly by the Cameroonian government via the *Ministère des Forêts et de la Faune* (MINFOF),

as well as by the German government's development bank (KfW), with technical support from the World Wildlife Fund (WWF) [33].

Although this plan aims at serving ecosystems and local communities, it raises concerns about 'fairness' in local participation for several reasons. For example, it comprises an imported development model, arranged by six management programs (sustainable finance mechanism, park protection, and surveillance, administration and finance, ecotourism development, research and monitoring, and collaborative management and local development) that facilitate government objectives in co-management. Furthermore, this model of participation merely endorses local involvement if the interests of local people correlate with the conditions outlined in four pillars that uphold the state's vision of co-management [33] (p. 31). These include:

Pillar 1 on 'community mobilization and participation' of the co-management plan, created cluster conservation zones, village forest management committees (VFMC), cluster platforms, and cluster facilitators. Within these structures, locals participate in capacity building, sensitization, elaboration, and implementation of co-management activities according to state laws. Through this pillar, partner institutions such as NGOs and state organs from various levels of the society help the MCNP Service to promote local participation in projects for both development and environmental protection. Local people also gain membership in VFMCs and carry out joint patrols in the MCNP alongside park authorities; they also meet every six months to discuss, validate, and implement new ideas for conservation and community development. Here, sensitization requires that locals gain knowledge of forestry reforms and the sustainable management of resources in order to participate better within the co-management model, but makes little recognition of the traditional context in which locals can manage forest resources.

Pillar 2 on 'implementation of a system of conservation incentives' infers a paternalist notion of participation that self-perpetuates the paradox of co-management. It ushers in conservation bonuses (CB) and conservation credits (CC). A CB is an incentive issued to locals based on local adherence to conservation development agreements (CDA) in co-management. A CC is a fixed incentive amounting to about 200,000 CFA francs (304.90 euros) annually per village, and determined in accordance with locals' compliance to state forestry laws. For the regime to reinforce its vision of co-management, it organizes monitoring and assessment activities every six months with the aid of agro-socio-ecological assessment (ASEA) reports. ASEA reports are presented during joint sessions between village representatives and park authorities. When locals trespass illegally into the MCNP, or hurt wildlife, such acts are recorded in books accessible to both park authorities and concerned locals during cluster platform meetings. Meetings are crucial for making decisions on what communities qualify for financial support of conservation incentives. Consequently, according to the 1994 forestry and wildlife state law, state officials can penalize individuals arrested in illegal activities like poaching through exorbitant fines and lengthy imprisonment.

Pillar 3, on 'immediate park management,' further indicates that paradox in co-management. Here, locals join park officials in activities of surveillance and patrol in the MCNP and gain training skills to perform as tour guides and porters in ecotourism. The locals participate as harvesters in community-based management of *Prunus africana*, a medicinal plant used in the treatment of cancer and grown for commercial use (see also [34]). While members of the VFMC join park authorities to patrol and arrest poachers on MCNP, pillar 3 does not specify the customary rights for which local people can continue to use the park.

Pillar 4, on the elaboration and implementation of conservation development agreements (CDA), involves another paradox. CDA is a state-determined platform to elaborate on projects of infrastructural development and income-generating activities. Ironically, for locals to benefit from such projects, their needs must correlate with visions of the CDA. Practically, CDA prioritizes local development needs, based on how well local people adhere to state forestry laws and co-management objectives. In other words, the degree to which local communities can benefit from state assistance with development greatly depends on how well the locals comply with the regulations of the state.

The above review of the literature [29,30,32,33,35] shows the legalities that guide the participation of institutions and local people in co-management. It also indicates that, although co-management aims at sharing roles fairly between different actors towards achieving certain goals, the system contradicts this notion because the ‘modeling’ of participation gives little space for locals to influence such modeling. Critics of participation [3,12–14,16,18,19] share similar views. They, however, do not give much attention to the possibilities for which institutional action and expertise at local levels of society could be used to facilitate local needs in participatory systems. The subsequent parts of this paper evaluate the concerns of local people about development and the opinions of institutional authorities regarding effective participation.

3. Materials and Methods

This study used a multimethod approach combining a review of literature, purposive sampling, a focus group study comprising 17 groups with 270 participants, and face-to-face interviews among 16 officials. We collected data between August and December 2017, following authorization from Cameroon’s Ministry of Forestry and Wildlife, the leading state body overseeing protected areas in Cameroon. In the case of the Mount Cameroon communities, the MCNP Service has the major responsibility for implementing co-management objectives by collaborating with local people in villages adjacent to the park. However, consistent with the stipulations of pillar 2 in the 2014 co-management plan [33] (p. 31), partner institutions such as state organs and NGOs within Cameroon and elsewhere, as well as subdivisional councils in the five subdivisions of Cameroon’s southwest region, have a duty to facilitate co-management when called upon, in agreement with the MCNP Service.

During staff meetings at the MCNP office in Buea, we brainstormed on possible partner institutions in the southwest. Considering the vast number of institutions that collaborate with the MCNP Service, and the unavailability of persons for interviews, we utilized expert sampling—a form of purposive sampling whereby the researcher focuses on experts in a particular field of interest. In doing so, the researcher makes a deliberate choice by selecting several participants who are willing to provide information [36]. We focused on three criteria for this interview selection.

- Subdivisional councils, NGOs, and state organs actively involved in facilitating co-management and whose head offices are permanently stationed in the southwest region of Cameroon.
- Selecting officials in each institution, whose duties pertain to co-management at community levels of society.
- Experts who provided their informed consent and acceptance for interviews following phone calls and visits to offices.

This enabled us to conduct face-to-face interviews of 45–50 min. According to [37], face-to-face interviews enable the researcher to observe facial expressions and body language—extra information on which the researcher can reflect. In doing so, we used semi-structured questions focusing on what areas of organizational expertise the institutions had and what specific roles they could adopt to address the needs of local people. To analyze these interviews, we applied qualitative descriptive analysis—an approach that uses interview data to make meaning of the world to improve our understanding of social phenomena [38]. In doing descriptive analysis, the researcher (a) identifies a phenomenon from the research questions such as possible gaps/challenges of participation; (b) finds the main constructs in interview responses, i.e., institutional roles and goals of interest in development; (c) measures the constructs intuitively by selecting quotations that could be meaningfully applied to address the concerns of local people. Below is an illustration of the institutions and experts interviewed (Table 2).

Table 2. Study institutions. Authors' field data (2017).

Subdivisional Councils		State Organs		NGOs	
Regional Division	Expert	Organ	Expert	Organization	Expert
Buea	Deputy staff	<i>Programme Nationale pour le Developpement Participatif (PNDP)</i>	Senior Staff	<i>Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit (GIZ)</i> project unit	Project leader
Limbe II	Senior staff	<i>Ministère des Forêts et de la Faune (MINFOF) regional delegation</i>	Senior Staff	Environment and Rural Development Foundation (ERUDEP)	Development Expert
Mbonge	Deputy staff	<i>Ministère de l'Economie, de la Planification et de l'Aménagement du Territoire (MINEPAT)</i>	Service staff	WWF local unit	Educator
Muyuka	Deputy staff	South West Development Authority (SOWEDA)	Technical staff	Mount Cameroon Ecotourism Organization (Mt. CEO)	Senior staff
Idenau	Deputy staff	Limbe Wildlife Centre (LWC)	Senior staff		
		Limbe Botanical and Zoological Garden MCNP Service	Absent Staff assistant		

The second method involved semistructured focus groups—a method that explores individual participants' views on different topics [39]. Together with MCNP officials and village chiefs, we opted for a purposive sample of 17 villages around MCNP. The villages have livelihoods connected to MCNP both directly and indirectly and are located less than 12 km from the park boundary. The aim was to include several villages that are part of the co-management system and that have livelihoods related to MCNP. In all of them, village chiefs selected participants for each of the focus groups (Table 3). Chiefs are in a better position to gather participants they know would represent their communities during meetings. The focus group meetings were comprised of persons from various walks of life including hunters, farmers, fishermen, and traders, who are members of various village committees and traditional councils (Figure 2).

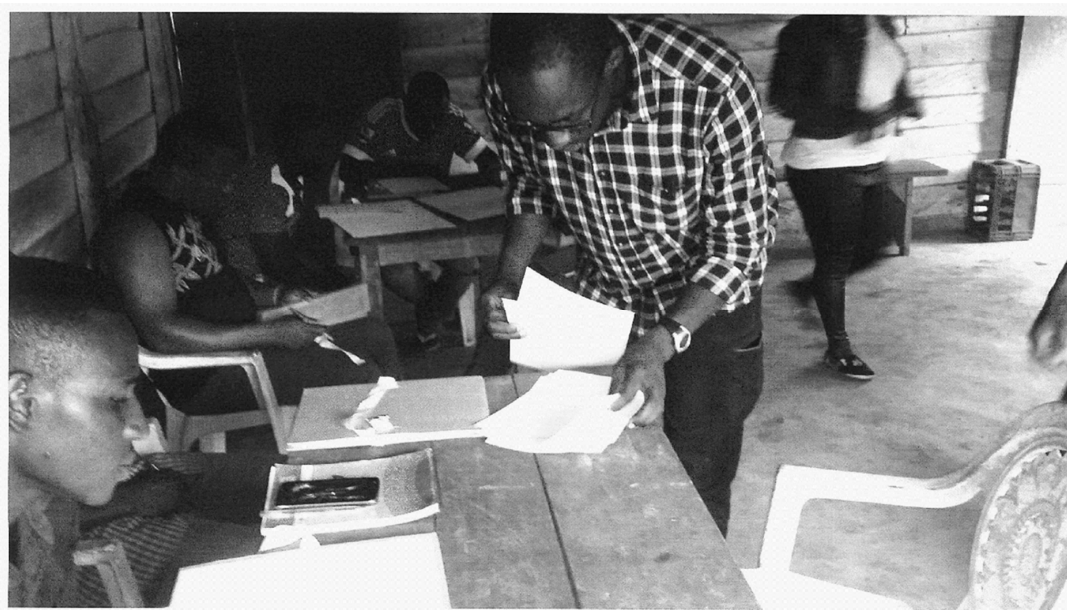
**Figure 2.** Group meeting with locals. Authors' field data (2017).

Table 3. Focus groups in the study. Authors' field data (2017).

MCNP Cluster Zone	Study Village	Focus Group No.	No. of Participants	Age Group	Male: Female
Buea	Bonakanda	1	16	16–60+	13:3
	Lower Boando	2	16	16–60+	12:4
West Coast	Batoke	3	16	26–60+	9:7
	Bakingili	4	16	26–60+	11:5
	Njonje	5	16	26–60	9:7
	Bibunde	6	14	26–60	12:2
	Sanje	7	16	16–60+	15:1
Muyuka	Lykoko	8	16	26–60+	12:4
	Munyenge	9	16	16–60+	12:4
Bomboko	Bomana	10	16	26–60+	14:2
	Big Koto I	11	16	26–60	13:3
	Efolofo	12	16	26–60	14:2
	Kuke Kumbo	13	16	26–60	15:1
	Munyange	14	16	26–60+	16:0
	Mundongo	15	16	16–60+	15:1
	Bova Bomboko	16	16	16–56	14:2
Boviongo	17	16	26–60+	13:3	

During meetings, cluster facilitators (CFs), who are park officials and mediators between village inhabitants and outsiders, acted as translators. In the villages considered in the study, the locals have differences of opinion about the task of CFs, which also depends on what kind of problems they have in their communities. However, it was important for us to have their assistance in translating the views of locals, mostly from the *Mokpwe* language. We considered these facilitators as guides that could be consulted on technical issues when organizing meetings. The lead author moderated the meetings, and a research assistant took notes and voice recordings of conversations. The duration of the meetings was on average 2 h. After obtaining informed consent, we used open-ended questions focusing on local opinions about how co-management affects the everyday life of village inhabitants and those needs the locals see as essential for development and wellbeing in their communities.

To analyze the data, we used the nominal group technique (NGT). NGT involves a ranking process of weighing an item against others and ordering the items on a scale according to the importance or priority [40]. In community research, NGT enables the research to identify elements that are of value to a community. In this study, the aim was to allow participants in focus groups to list those development needs they considered important for the wellbeing of people in their communities. In doing so, the researcher moderates the NGT following a sequence of tasks. (a) Familiarizing participants on the subject of co-management and its role in fostering community participation. The researcher then invites participants to express their thoughts about the participatory system. (b) The researcher discusses ideas raised in the groups and asks individuals to list those needs of development that have to be addressed in the co-management system on a piece of paper. (c) Rank ordering the needs by determining the most listed elements in a focus group. This requires identifying those listed development needs with the highest score for each focus group (Table 4). The 'number of counts' below is based on how many individuals in a focus group listed a corresponding need as being of interest to his/her community.

Table 4. Prioritizing development needs through NGT. Authors' field data (2017).

Study Village	Focus Group No.	No. of Participants	Community Needs	No. of Counts
Bonakanda	1	16	Youth employment and community halls	13
Lower Boando	2	16	Farm equipment and workshop	10
Batoke	3	16	Youth employment	12
Bakingili	4	16	Water supply	8
Njonje	5	16	Funding to fishermen and respecting farm boundary	9
Bibunde	6	14	Modifying farm-to-park boundary	8
Sanje	7	16	Finding assistance to fishermen	10
Lykoko	8	16	Distancing park boundary from farmland	11
Munyenge	9	16	Water supply	8
Bomana	10	16	Sensitization on conservation, supply farm equipment, and training new techniques for crop cultivation	10
Big Koto I	11	16	Supply water, electricity, and telecommunication networks	9
Efolofo	12	16	Electricity and water supply	7
Kuke Kumbo	13	16	Health center, water supply, and farm tools	11
Munyange	14	16	Youth employment and health care	16
Mundongo	15	16	Water supply and telecommunication networks	13
Bova Bomboko	16	16	Health center, water supply, and improve farm-market roads	11
Boviongo	17	16	Water supply	14

4. Results

The previous parts of this paper reviewed the legalities of participation between communities and institutions around MCNP. We also highlighted the contradictory provisions of co-management and the methods for data collection and analysis. In this section, we present, on the one hand, the concerns raised by participants in the focus groups, and, on the other hand, the views of institutional experts about their role in participatory development.

4.1. Local Concerns about Participation

We identified three main concerns in the focus groups. First, in principle, co-management should necessitate the fair inclusion of local people in decisions that involve local livelihoods and the natural environment. However, in the case of MCNP, focus group discussions indicated that the system of participation had many initial promises for development that have been delayed for years without any sign of implementation. To highlight two examples, a local stated:

“The park people are slow in acting. I have not seen anything that I would class as development in our community as far as the park is concerned. Not all activities promised by the park authorities have been fulfilled. We get very little help and what we do get cannot fully support village projects. A good number of locals still do not understand the conservation development agreement between the park and the community.” (Field data, 2017)

Another individual explained:

“I am not happy because the main problem for us, locals, is the lack of drinkable water and sufficient water for our farms. At the beginning of the co-management, the authorities ran the projects well, but they have not seen things through properly. They keep on postponing their plans to act. This is why I am not pleased with the participation system. More is still expected from the park officials.” (Field data, 2017)

The above examples illustrate what we think is a paradox of participating in co-management. In situations of local concern about unfulfilled promises, many of the participants requested the state authorities to issue development incentives that can serve as a reciprocal obligation for locals to ensure their compliance with state forestry law. The locals suggest receiving such assistance, which will not only help to boost the wellbeing of people but will also enable them to help the regime by reporting unsustainable practices like poaching and encroachment on MCNP.

Second, in spite of state efforts to encourage growth in the production of cocoa and other food crops in villages, there were difficulties when it came to transporting farm produce to the market. The locals attributed this situation to poor, narrow, and stony road conditions, as well as a lack of electricity, which made communication difficult between buyers and sellers. Consider the thoughts of a farmer in Boviongo:

“The remoteness of the village makes it hard for farmers to transport cocoa to the market. At times, the farmers have to wait and hope for traders to arrive from far away, which is usually difficult. I am hoping that the government could support the community by maintaining the road conditions. Some of the budget for roads could be used to employ youths who do not have jobs, so as they could assist in renovating the roads for farmers and traders.” (Field data, 2017)

Furthermore, participants noted that such state attempts to enhance yields in farm crops required issuing farm equipment and learning new methods of crop cultivation. Participants from other villages had the same view (Table 4). On a similar note, the locals complained that park officials had extended the protected area boundary into village farmland, as specified in the words of another participant:

“I am aware that the locals need to help protect wildlife in the park, but it is also important for park officials to respect our farmland that is located close to the park boundary. Despite the support we gave to officials in the past, they take our farms without any dialogue.” (Field data, 2017)

Third, sensitization was a fundamental concern mentioned during focus group meetings. In this example, sensitization aims at creating awareness among locals on several topics, such as how to adopt sustainable practices for biodiversity conservation in MCNP, methods for getting higher crop yields, and ideas about the exchange of information on development activities. In this example, participants felt that management officials had not entirely educated them on the content of conservation development agreements (CDC) and laws adopted in co-management. Some respondents perceived forest management committees as having little information for them. Even so, some participants did not have adequate knowledge about the endangered species of animals and plants in MCNP. In Munyenge, for instance, a local stated:

“The population has increased over the years. People cut down trees and do not know which trees the forestry law protects. Some of the locals have trees on their farmland but are told not to cut them down without consulting with park management authorities. The laws are outdated and need to be revised to help the locals know what to do in promoting biodiversity conservation.” (Field data, 2017)

Group participants also explained that some management officials collected data from them without giving details of how they would use the information, and did not report back on the results. The lack of accountability and transparency in participation poses a further problem in this system of management. If such information was properly communicated to locals, respondents would most likely not complain about the need for sensitization.

It is, however, worth noting that, in spite of these concerns among locals, some focus groups did embrace the current system of participation. For example, in focus groups 9, 10, 13, and 15 (Table 4), participants acknowledged the benefits of the training workshops that enabled them to generate income for their families. Furthermore, they indicated that the cassava machines supplied by the MCNP Service helped to produce an edible product, *garri* (cassava, crushed into grains and fried), that was of high demand in local markets. As such, the locals indicated that an increase in the supply of machines would enable them to expand their production of *garri*. This is a good example of how the local community embraced development ideas determined by the authorities, which can be adapted for meeting other development needs (Table 4).

4.2. Institutional Knowledge, Expertise, and Capacity for Action

To identify institutional knowledge and expertise, we need to understand the views of officials whose day-to-day activities are related to collaboration with local communities (Table 2). In the case of the five subdivisional councils in the southwest region of Cameroon, the interviews showed that councils had counsellors—individuals stationed in villages, with the responsibility of acting as intermediaries between council staff and village inhabitants. They do so by reporting to councils on matters affecting local communities, and in return, communicating feedback from councils to the local community. In practice, subdivisional councils, ratified by decentralization state laws, have the responsibility to examine local needs and request financial assistance from PNDP and external bodies. An official in the Mbonge Council had this thought about his institution’s role:

“In the past, most activities done in cooperation with local communities were centralized. It is only in recent years that we are beginning to have the decentralization laws implemented. Our institutional role of working with locals is still very new. One of our goals is to explore ways of transforming natural resources into avenues of development to serve the communities. The laws are, however, clear and our council tries to comply with them. The council aims at having a common understanding with the locals, making them know the limits of using the forest traditionally. Be it harvesting timber and hunting animals for their cultural needs, we need to ensure that the locals can sustain biodiversity. The council’s tasks are at times limited by a lack of finances. There are many financial constraints against achieving some of its goals. The council intends to collaborate more with various conservation agencies and local communities to develop MCNP resources in ways that can improve the Bomboko road and the wellbeing of people living around MCNP.” (Field data, 2017)

Another official from Idenau Council added:

“The villages in the Idenau area have a memorandum of understanding with the MCNP Service and its partners. Since the creation of the park, the locals signed several documents and deposited them at the council. The council, therefore, engages in every activity to do with the locals and the park authorities. One area of interest for us is collaborating with forest management committees, through which we help the locals to understand what animals and

trees can be preserved. I must admit that the coming of the park has altered the traditions of the people. There are heritage sites in the park that the locals once freely visited to perform their rituals. Nowadays, the locals have to obtain permission from the park authorities before entry. The council also aims at encouraging the locals on how they can make use of nontimber forest products to generate income. As the park is here to stay, there is an obligation to train the locals in skills they can adopt to be self-reliant, such as the management of beehives and providing social amenities for the communities.” (Field data, 2017)

In the above examples, though subdivisional councils have a legal responsibility to facilitate community development, their capacity to act in the co-management system requires familiarizing themselves with new challenges. In particular, they must find ways to balance the biodiversity conservation needs of the park and the local needs of communities.

Interviews showed that organs of the state were crucial to ease the decentralization process. For instance, an official at MINEPAT explained that:

“The communities around Mount Cameroon now have a protected area. There is a need for regulated approaches to forest exploitation. The lawmakers must take into account the plight of local people so they do not feel left out. MINEPAT comes in at this level to coordinate stakeholders in the southwest region. The aim is to develop a common mapping platform tool in the next five years, to facilitate access to information between villages and agencies in the field. This will make it easier for various actors to understand development needs and act from a common standpoint where everyone is included in decision-making. Both the village chiefs and council mayors have an important role to play in this process.” (Field data, 2017)

At PNDF, an official made this appraisal:

“PNDF operates in several sectors involving agriculture, water, mining, administration, and security. One of our aims is helping regional councils realize their community development plans. Through the councils, PNDF can identify what needs the villages have and what represents a priority project for financing. Upon approval of such plans, PNDF directly participates in villages by conducting feasibility studies, designing microprojects, and disbursing funds to help councils realize these projects.” (Field data, 2017)

Officials at MINFOF and the MCNP Service shared similar views in interviews. The MCNP Service, for instance, plays a central role in managing issues of forestry and wildlife between MCNP and adjacent villages. It does so in collaboration with councils and partner NGOs. However, the interviews suggest that the capacity for such a partnership to be effective in the co-management system significantly depends on mechanisms for communication such as a memorandum of understanding and partnership agreements. Both mechanisms also require technical, financial, and moral support. Without these essentials for participation, it becomes hard to achieve certain projects in villages.

In the examples of SOWEDA and LWC, officials talked about their expertise in fostering capacity building in communities. For example, when collaborating with people living in the Mount Cameroon area, SOWEDA is consulted to facilitate agricultural development and issue seedlings and tools, while remaining conscious of the impact that agriculture has on forestland. They acknowledged, however, that the coming of protected areas and conservation laws obliges their institution to find alternative means of livelihood for local people, which, again, depends on the availability of finances in the system of participation.

Concerning the role of NGOs in the co-management system, the interviews demonstrate the efforts made by officials to draw locals into practices of conservation and development. For instance, in the words of a GIZ official:

“As far as co-management is concerned, the local people are part and parcel of the decision-making process. In the past, we have had foreign agencies visiting with

pre-conceived ideas, which the locals often find hard to understand. Our focus has been to understand local perceptions about the use of natural resources and what interests they have in the park. A difficulty is that many of the locals still believe biodiversity will be available forever without depletion. Our organization helps to ensure that the locals can continue to rely on certain plants in the forest for traditional healing. We are exploring ways to promote local participation in the sustainable use of forest through the option of access cards that will enable local people to use the park in a controlled manner.” (Field data, 2017)

On another note, NGOs exert both moral and technical support in participation. An interviewee at Mt. CEO talked about its role in the promotion of ecotourism—an activity that often requires the employment of local people who are very familiar with the land. Meanwhile, a WWF local unit assists MCNP officials with the equipment, skills, and information necessary for wildlife protection. An interview with a WWF official showed that, apart from technical interest, the organization works in collaboration with local communities. It does so through sensitization programs to promote knowledge of biodiversity conservation. Consider this comment from one official:

“One difficulty with preserving the biodiversity of MCNP comes from poaching activities. It is, therefore, an important goal of our capacity-building unit to train and educate locals on wildlife conservation, to reduce the frequent occurrence of illegal activities in protected areas. There is the saying that ‘you can sell an elephant a thousand times when you use a camera and not a bullet.’ One of our future priorities is to develop new educational courses on biodiversity conservation, targeting the basic educational sector in the southwest region.” (Field data, 2017)

5. Discussion

We have identified the paradox of co-management, which is an unrepresented local input in the system. Furthermore, in elaborating on the fieldwork results, we identified observations, stressing on the one hand the concerns of local people, and on the other hand the role of small institutions. In previous studies, critiques of participation [3,12–14,16,18,19] examined the undesirable outcomes of state-led participatory systems without much analysis of how institutional knowledge could better acknowledge the development needs of local people in co-management. To bridge this gap, the results of our study suggest three factors for advancing the existing literature on the critique of participation.

First, as to the legal basis for participation between institutions and local people, there are opportunities we can exploit for improving co-management despite its paradoxes. Previous studies have shown that the dominant model of centrally driven participation compromises the effectiveness of conservation projects [12,14,19]. In such modeling, capitalist elites tend to remake biodiversity landscapes for capital accumulation [13]. Even so, in spite of decentralizing power, shady practices do exist that lead to the inefficient performance of institutions [17]. While we agree with these assertions, our study suggests that legislation for participation should have pragmatic provisions that can be customized to enhance community involvement. Examples of such laws include Cameroon’s 2004 decentralization law that formalized the role of subdivisional councils in supporting local communities, Cameroon’s 1996 decentralization law on freedom of association that permits NGOs to have a hand in environmental protection, and the 1994 state forestry law for the inclusion of indigenous people in forestry. The pragmatism of these laws indicates that placing local knowledge that arises from the human-environment relationship at the core of participation will avoid politicizing or imposing development on locals. This type of knowledge would include the convictions by which local people have lived; as partners with the environment, they have been using it traditionally for much longer than MCNP has existed. That is why respecting the opinions of local people has great potential for ensuring effective participation.

Second, regarding the paradox of co-management and the concerns of local people, the results revealed that many respondents in the focus groups had little awareness of forestry laws and the

regulations for biodiversity conservation. They knew little about the results of data collected from villages and the content of conservation development agreements (CDA). Consistent with these findings, the existing literature has assessed the mixed success of the NGO sector in engaging with participatory methodologies [3]. Previous studies have proposed that, despite inequalities in such sectors, enhancing the political rights of marginalized groups in participatory development can help provide the transformative change needed in wider power structures. Furthermore, [16] called for a reconsideration of development practitioner roles in implementing participation among people. The case of MCNP, however, suggests that such practitioner roles in the hands of institutions, as well as the political rights that local people need in participation, could be amended through accountable and transparent forms of communication. That is, participation should be based on a two-way, open system of information exchange wherein locals can question institutional assistance, and institutions must justify their actions.

Third, in acknowledging the development needs of local people, MCNP showed that smaller institutions aiming to promote biodiversity conservation have difficulties with providing alternative livelihoods for locals. Similar issues have been addressed in studies about broader governance structures that do not always lead to local empowerment and control [18]. Nevertheless, our inquiry on the subdivisional level of governance revealed the willingness of institutions to engage in dialogue about the local use of forests in making decisions for preserving biodiversity. What we recommend, therefore, is that such eagerness for dialogue between locals and smaller institutions be utilized to create what [6] call adaptive social-ecological systems. In these systems, institutions cooperate with locals to come to decisions about community projects and provide locals with first-hand information about how they intend to promote local knowledge of the environment. Such knowledge, being a conflation of ideas, should culturally and ecologically link to real-life practices recognizable by differences between the needs of locals who live in remote villages and those living closer to urban areas. These are different experiences of the use of the natural environment that institutions need to take into consideration to meet development needs.

6. Conclusions

This study deliberated on the role of institutions that nest in contradictory spaces of participation between local people and co-management regimes. For a historical understanding of this relationship, we reviewed the literature on structural adjustments in Cameroon and its influence on acculturating local communities into neoliberal ideas and inequalities of participatory development. Using the example of a co-management system for MCNP and adjacent communities, we explored how mechanisms of participation are governed by state regulations that accommodate local inclusion in structures to execute predetermined actions of the regime. In this study, we acknowledged the inequitable sharing of power among actors and the development needs/concerns that local people have. Our results show that several neoliberal exercises around MCNP are steered by subdivisional councils, state organs, and NGOs to assist communities with development projects legalized by state regulations. Here, the presence of strict laws to preserve protected areas makes the need for alternative sources of income important for village inhabitants. This is why local people increasingly internalize the aims, principles, and values of development, basing their priority needs on the neoliberal agenda of institutions.

Previous studies related to institutional knowledge in participatory systems [3,12–14,16,18,19] have accorded this unfavorable outcome to systems that determine participation with little influence from locals. However, there has been little exploration of how institutional knowledge at local levels of society could facilitate local needs in these undesirable systems of participation. Our analysis indicates that, in this situation, although co-management does not entirely favor all actors, the pragmatic basis of institutional knowledge provides avenues by which we can improve community participation. An effective method would be the joint management of tasks between institutions and local people without autocratic influence. This will help enhance the efficiency of putting into practice policies and laws for participation.

Furthermore, not many locals had full knowledge about the use of information gathered from them by the regime in spite of the village forest management committees (VFMCs) set up for discussion between locals and park officials. Accountable and transparent communication between communities and institutions should ensure that local people have full knowledge about the use of information gathered from them. Some officials expressed their lack of knowledge about the traditional context for using and maintaining biodiversity in protected areas. This hinders the adaptive capacity that institutions target for social-ecological systems. Open dialogue, collective action, and the exchange of first-hand information between institutions and local communities in decisions about community projects will help develop new insights as to how traditional knowledge can be integrated into the proper management of protected areas. While these suggestions may be hard to achieve in the current system of co-management, institutional knowledge remains an important tool with which we can explore options for augmenting community participation.

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