



## ENTERPRISE IN THE UNDERGROWTH: EXPLORING THE WAYS CHINESE COMPANIES OPERATE IN THE DJA FOREST IN CAMEROON

James Mayers<sup>1</sup>, Samuel Assembe-Mvondo<sup>2,\*</sup> & Hang Zhou<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup> *International Institute for Environment and Development, London, United Kingdom*

<sup>2</sup> *Research Institute for Humanity and Nature, Kyoto, Japan*

<sup>3</sup> *CHR. Michelsen Institute, Bergen, Norway*

\*E-mail: [s.assembe@cgiar.org](mailto:s.assembe@cgiar.org)

**ABSTRACT** Chinese company activity in African forests is often portrayed in oversimplified terms—as a much-needed driver of development or an unwelcome and unconstrained free-for-all. The resulting weak understanding also leads to a low level of engagement by government and non-governmental actors with the operations of these companies on the ground. By examining Chinese engagements in Cameroon’s Dja forest area and avoiding seeing Chinese companies as a homogenous collective, we tease out the heterogeneity in their business profiles, operational practices, and impacts on local communities and the forests. We analyze how Chinese companies, in particular, small- and medium-sized timber enterprises, operate and engage with government. We find that business creativity, which could conceivably be the seedbed for sustainability, is in practice stifled by everyday operations embedded within and enabled by the informal rules and practices that condition the “real” functioning of forestry governance in Cameroon.

**KEYWORDS:** Cameroon; China; Chinese companies; Everyday operations; Forestry; Timber trade.

### INTRODUCTION

Expansion of the number and different forms of operation of Chinese enterprises in forest areas in Africa in recent years has stimulated growing interest in examining the sustainability of this engagement, in terms of the social and environmental impacts on the surrounding communities and habitats (Canby et al. 2008; Sun et al. 2014; Laurance et al. 2017). While investment from other countries is having similar effects, it is often the collectively large and increasing scale of activity by Chinese companies—in forestry, agribusiness, mining and infrastructure—that has provoked particular attention (Cerutti et al. 2011; Mayers 2018). However, in ways similar to the discourse on other natural resource extraction activities, such as that on corporate-driven land deals (Buckley 2013) or mining (Hilson et al. 2014), the debate on Chinese forest-based interventions is often homogenized in an oversimplified binary narrative, perceiving China either as development partner, representing a rare source of finance outside of Western countries for much-needed investment in infrastructure and industrialisation, or as economic competitor or neo-colonial master with an insatiable appetite for Africa’s natural resources, disregarding local socio-environmental regulations and weakening the influence of the former colonial powers (Alden 2007; Sautman & Yan 2009).



The narrative revolving around Chinese forest-based interventions in Cameroon, as in some other forest-rich African countries, leans towards the latter view, partly because the arrival of Chinese actors is framed as contributing to the erosion of dominance and privilege long enjoyed by other foreign companies in Cameroon's export-oriented timber industry (Cerutti et al. 2011: 24). Yet, contrary to common perceptions, existing comparative research on corporate behavior amongst Chinese and European timber companies in Cameroon (Cerutti et al. 2011), and in a rubber production company there whose ownership has shifted from non-Chinese to Chinese state capital (Assembe-Mvondo et al. 2016), suggests that the nationality of the capital or company ownership does not make a significant difference to the social and environmental impacts of these companies.

The purpose of this article is to bring some further clarity to the debate on Chinese forest-based interventions in Cameroon. While certainly insightful, analysis of the subject to date has fallen short in two aspects (size of company and related behaviors taking in account a size), both of which may be partly attributed to the difficulty in accessing Chinese interlocutors on the ground. Firstly, despite their comparative nature, the aforementioned research typically includes only one Chinese company in the analysis, hence lacking evaluation of the heterogeneity of Chinese actors. Secondly, while most Chinese companies in Africa's timber sector are small-scale private enterprises (Cerutti et al. 2016; Pepke et al. 2016; Weng & Putzel 2017), we still know surprisingly little about how they actually operate on the ground and interact with others in Cameroon's forestry sector (e.g., other local timber companies, officials and regulators). This paper hence also follows previous research (Wenbin & Wilkes 2013; Weng et al. 2018) on the landscape of Chinese forestry investments in Africa that makes a distinction between Chinese companies which have the authorizations of the Chinese Ministry of Commerce (MOFCOM) to operate outside the country, and those classified as Small-Scale Producers or Small Economic Operator, but goes further to explore the mixture of formal and informal behaviors and logics that underpin the business practices of this second category of economic operators. As a preliminary attempt to fill these two lacunae, this paper geographically confines its analysis to a subnational area in Cameroon—the Dja Faunal Reserve—and draws on fieldwork to provide an empirically-grounded understanding of different Chinese actors' engagements in forest-related sectors around the Dja area and their social and environmental impacts.

This article is organized as follows: we first introduce China's overall engagement profile in Cameroon's forestry sector and background information on the Dja Faunal Reserve. Subsequently, we present our findings about the heterogeneity of Chinese presence around the Dja area and seek to unpack particularly the everyday operations of small-scale Chinese timber investors.

## METHODS

The information analyzed in this paper was first gathered from the review of the literature on Chinese investments in Africa in general, and Cameroon, in particular. Official documents linking both parties (China and Cameroon) were then consulted to retrieve formal and substantive elements that appeared to be relevant. In this vein, drawing on existing research, particularly a detailed review of issues related to Chinese investments in Cameroon's forests (Mayers et al. 2019) and a mapping exercise of Sino-Asian investments in Cameroon's forestry sector (Assembe-Mvondo 2020), we have identified a key list of Chinese stakeholders operating around the Dja area and the potential social, environmental and economic issues relating to their operations.

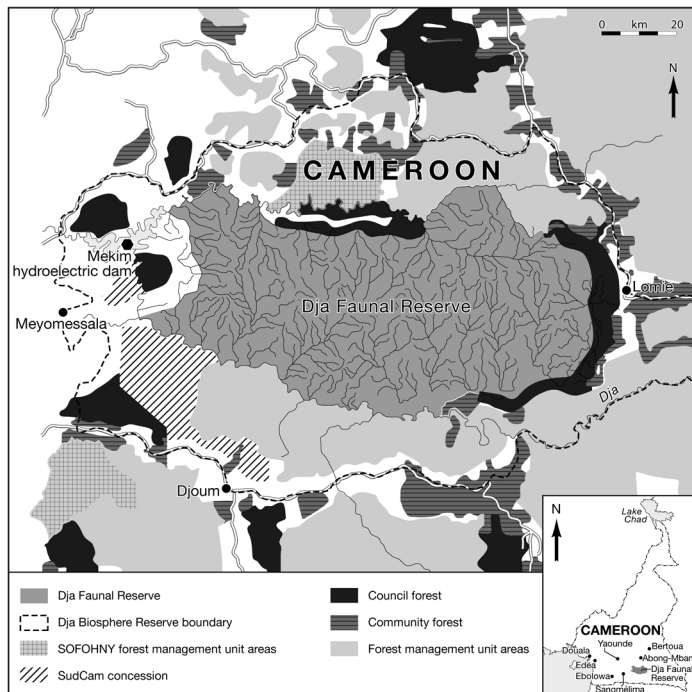
Two rounds of fieldwork were then conducted between April and May, and September 2019 mainly in Douala, Yaoundé and the Dja area. The data collection method followed an approach employed for exploratory case studies, including interviews with the identified Chinese business actors (contractors, investors and traders), precisely seven (7); Cameroonian government representatives in the forestry sector (5); international and local environmental NGOs (6); and local timber business actors (9). Analysis of official documents and reports at the central and department levels, and a review of the relevant survey, research and policy literature available in French, English and Chinese languages were also undertaken. All the names of Chinese and Cameroonian private companies and the towns in which they are located are withheld since the informants provided information under the condition of anonymity.

## OVERVIEW OF CHINA–CAMEROON FORESTRY ENGAGEMENT AND THE DJA FAUNAL RESERVE

China continues to be the biggest consumer of Cameroon's timber—as it has been for the last 10 years—being the destination of an average of about 800,000 m<sup>3</sup> of roundwood equivalent exported per year in the five years between 2014 and 2018 (COMCAM 2019; NIS 2019). Vietnam has risen to second place in recent years—and in 2018, China and Vietnam between them were the destination of a higher volume of timber exported from Cameroon than the rest of the world put together (COMCAM 2019; NIS 2019). These data reported by Cameroon sources, however, are substantially less to the corresponding data from customs services in China, in part explained by both definitional and procedural differences between these agencies, but also likely to reflect illegal trading activities (Assembe-Mvondo 2020: 24–25).

In terms of the area of forests exploited by Chinese companies, while in 2014 there were 562,256 ha in Forest Management Units (FMUs) whose title was owned by Chinese companies, analysis of Ministry of Forests and Wildlife of Cameroon (MINFOF, French Acronym) data suggests that by 2019, 15 enterprises with Chinese capital managed 1,049,323 ha in FMU timber source areas, or 1,073,594 ha in *ventes de coupe*—or sales of standing volume (SSV)—areas are added (Assembe-Mvondo 2020). At least 13 community forest that have notarized partnerships with Chinese companies approved by MINFOF, i.e. 65,000 ha maximum out of a total about 280,000 ha in 2019 (MINFOF 2019a). About 7.2 million hectares of forest area overall in Cameroon are under these three forms of permit, so Chinese-Asian companies have official access to about 18.8% of this area. In terms of wood processing (sawmills), in 2019 there were at least 33 sawmills out of some 203 identified in Cameroon that have Chinese capital and partners (MINFOF 2019b). Among them, five have a fixed capacity of over 5,000 m<sup>3</sup> annually (four owned by the large company Vicwood-Thany and one by the more medium-scale SOFOHNY), while the rest have a fixed or mobile capacity ranging from 1,000 to 5,000 m<sup>3</sup> (Assembe-Mvondo 2020: 10–11).

The region we focus on, the Dja forest area (Figure 1), covers almost two million hectares of moist lowland forest in the south and east of Cameroon. It encompasses the core 526,000 ha UNESCO-listed Dja Faunal Reserve, a mosaic of forestry, agribusiness and mining concessions, agricultural land and community-managed forests that surround the reserve, and together constituting the Dja Biosphere Reserve. Whilst the World Heritage Committee has expressed concerns over threats to the biodiversity of the area and requested urgent action be taken to address them, the Cameroonian government's Conservation



**Figure 1** Map of the Dja forest area showing some sites of Chinese company operations.

Service still manages the reserve with limited capacity. The reserve also has a population of approximately 4,000 inhabitants in the core area and 40,000 inhabitants in the surrounding areas. Some small-farm rubber growing has begun in recent years in Meyomessala and Meyomessi in the vicinity of the SudCam plantations (see below). An exogenous population has also increased in recent years, partly attracted by mining, logging and agro-industrial activities.

Social conflict between local ethnic groups in the Dja area and the Cameroonian state was galvanized in part by the creation of the wildlife reserve in 1950 by the French colonial administration (see Table 1). Further subsequent designations of protected area status have been perceived by these indigenous peoples as restriction or prohibition of free access to their own land and forest resources (Nguiffo 2001). There remains a largely hidden conflict against the authority of the Dja Biosphere Reserve to this day (see Sounkoue et al. 2020). Combined with the relatively recent arrival of commercial logging, agribusiness, including rubber cultivation, and infrastructure projects—promising much but being perceived locally as delivering little in terms of socioeconomic opportunities and environmental management—the sources of local social conflict with economic and state actors continue to simmer.

## FINDINGS

Our fieldwork reveals a wide range of Chinese-linked engagements in the Dja area. Two of the most prominent ones are: SudCam, owned by the Chinese company Sinochem and involved in forest clearing, planting and processing of rubber; and Hydro-Mékin, a public enterprise currently managing hydro-electric infrastructure financed and constructed

**Table 1** Status of the rights of indigenous people and local communities in the Dja area (authors)

Nature of rights	Status	Situation in the Dja area
Land and forest rights	Partially recognized by the 1994 forest and wildlife law in forest concessions and protected areas	Not fully complied with, <i>de facto</i> practices
Procedural rights: participation in decision-making processes, access to information and justice	Recognized by the 1986 environmental law framework	Partial compliance
Access rights to land and forest resources	Recognized by the 1994 forest Law and 1974 land law	Not recognized inside the Dja Faunal Reserve and restricted in the buffer zone
Rights related to free, prior and informed consent	Not yet recognized in Cameroon	Not recognized
Cultural rights	Recognized by the 1994 forest law	Partial compliance
Development of rights and access to benefit sharing	Recognized by the 1994 forest law, 1996 environmental law and 1974 land law	Partial compliance

Note: Authors' compilation based on Republic of Cameroon (1974, 1996 & 1994).

by Chinese capital and engineering. In affecting large areas of forest, the establishment and operations of these two entities have the most significant implications for biodiversity and social livelihoods of local (Bantu) and indigenous (Baka) communities. Additionally, we identify another major Chinese-owned logging company with a FMU neighbouring Dja, several timber companies with private Chinese capital based in towns near the Dja area, and smaller Cameroonian timber traders who have forged a working partnership with Chinese actors. With these heterogeneous Chinese actors operating on the ground forging various connections with local counterparts, we also explore the potential of leveraging the incipient Chinese timber traders' association in Cameroon and the recently-established government-led multi-stakeholder platform for the Dja Faunal Reserve for dialogue with Chinese actors on social and environmental compliance.

SudCam-Hévée is a subsidiary of the Singapore-based Halcyon Agri group, which was acquired in 2016 by the mainly Chinese multinational Sinochem International Overseas Pte. Ltd. In 2011, the Cameroonian government granted an initial area from its permanent forest estate neighboring the Dja Biosphere Reserve of almost 45,000 ha for the development of industrial rubber cultivation. The concession agreement signed between SudCam and the State provides for an annual rent of about one US dollar per hectare—a rather trifling sum. The initial agro-industrial plan put forward by SudCam revolved around the development of 30,000 ha of rubber plantation, the construction of a processing plant and the creation of more than 6,000 jobs. To date, nearly 10,000 ha have been planted with rubber following forest clearing—and rubber extraction was underway in January 2019 (Assembe-Mvondo 2020). Construction of processing facilities continues. The number of employees at SudCam is reportedly over 1,000, with some 178 from neighboring villages (Bakouma et al. 2018). Infrastructure and facilities for these employees, and for the benefit of several neighboring villages, have been built—roads, electrification, water supplies, and some housing, schools, sports facilities and dispensaries.

Since early 2019, issues associated with SudCam have been prominent in the media and in discussion forums in Cameroon, with various incidents of social conflict being

reported. In exploring these, various donor-financed initiatives, such as LandCam—a collaboration between Centre for Environment and Development (CED), Réseau de lutte contre la faim (RELUFA) and the International Institute for Environment and Development (IIED) with support from the European Commission—have been in dialogue with SudCam and organising face-to-face dialogues between the company and communities (Sonkoue & Nguiffo 2019; Sonkoue et al. 2020).

Environmental concerns have intensified. Data indicate that the Sudcam plantation is currently less than one kilometre from intact primary forest habitat, and concerns are growing about threats to endangered species within and outside the Dja reserve. Some have also noted the significant carbon emissions related to clearing 10,000 ha or more of dense tropical forest, and Greenpeace has called this expansion “by far the most devastating new clearing of forest for industrial agriculture in the Congo Basin” (Greenpeace 2018). Earthsight (2018) also reported that SudCam has cleared roughly 330 ha of forest outside its concession boundaries, and while it is possible that additional permissions may have been given, the parent company has not been able to verify this. In late 2018, a study by the Norwegian Sovereign Wealth Fund recommended that it pull out of investment—the equivalent of 0.1% of Halcyon’s shares, worth about US\$0.65 million—in Halcyon Agri, citing the unacceptable risk that the company is responsible for serious environmental damage (Council on Ethics 2018).

Along with pressures from some NGOs, the global market also appears to be having some impact on activities at SudCam. Some major buyers such as Michelin have adopted responsible buying policies that call for protection of high conservation value forests and management of carbon. In late 2018, Halcyon Agri announced a pause on forest clearing, the development of a Sustainable Natural Rubber Supply Chain Policy, and the creation of an independent Sustainability Council to work on sustainability recommendations provided by WWF (Halcyon Agri 2018). Amongst those appointed members of this Council is the Chinese-owned timber company SOFOHNY (see below) (Halcyon-Corrie MacColl 2019). By April 2019, satellite imagery indicated no further forest clearing had occurred since 2018 and Halcyon Agri representatives had spoken of a new model of rubber development through smallholder production (Mongabay 2019).

According to our interviews, the company had by 2020 prepared over two million young rubber plants for distribution to village planters, but various respondents from the local communities complained that these seedlings were yet to be made available. These respondents further believed that the company was behind schedule in implementing its commitments to local infrastructure and facilities. In commenting on the changed plans and actions of the company, officials from the Ministry of the Environment believe that the company is making significant efforts to meet its social and environmental commitments. It is understood too that SudCam is in the process of finalising a memorandum of understanding with the Ministry of Livestock, Fisheries and Animal Industries (MINEPIA) for technical assistance to the development of fluvial fishing for some residents near the Dja river, and to fish farming for other local communities. Other observers have noted that SudCam appears to provide significant material support in the form of motorcycles, fuel and other equipment to the conservation service for the Dja Biosphere Reserve and the local representation of MINFOF in the town of Meyomessala (Bakouma et al. 2018).

Growing attention within China in recent years to the social-environmental impact of its companies’ overseas operations, particularly state-owned ones, also appears to have contributed to the changes in corporate behavior in SudCam. As a result of a collaboration programme between China and the UK involving numerous international environmental organisations, the Chinese Guidelines on Sustainable Nature Rubber were officially

launched in October 2017 by the China Chamber of Commerce of Metals, Minerals and Chemicals Importers and Exporters (CCCMC), an industrial-wide association supervised by the Ministry of Commerce. Despite its voluntary nature, the publication of these Guidelines provides Chinese rubber investors with ‘business policies, management frameworks, risk analysis, evaluation references and implementing methods for identifying, preventing, and managing relevant risks, so as to help them ... achieve business compliance and sustainable development (CCCMC 2017: 6)’. The Guidelines hold the potential to become a policy tool for advocacy groups and host countries to monitor investment behavior by Chinese rubber investors abroad. Already there have been some international efforts to harness this development to facilitate dialogue with Sinochem, a member of CCCMC, in the hope of piloting the Guidelines in SudCam. A partnership between Halcyon Agri and CCCMC was established in early 2020, with the stated aim of fostering sustainable development in overseas rubber plantations.

Hydro-Mékin is a publicly owned company which manages the Mékin hydroelectric dam on the Dja river, close to the Dja Biosphere Reserve. The facility, consisting of a 15 MW generating plant and a 45.30 km<sup>2</sup> reservoir, was financed with a loan of US\$53 million from China’s Exim Bank and built by the China National Electric Engineering Corporation (CNEEC). CNEEC officially handed over the project to the Cameroonian government in January 2019 and The Minister of Water and Energy pushed ahead in activating operations of the Mékin dam in the same year. Our fieldwork revealed that, as of mid-2019, there were still about 15 Chinese professionals on site, from CNEEC and from Shanxi Yunwei, a Chinese company contracted by CNEEC to be responsible for a one-year operational and maintenance period, including hands-on training of local engineers. This operational team had limited English and no French language skills collectively, with one Cameroonian interpreter.

The Hydro-Mékin project has a legacy of environmental and social issues that are yet to be addressed. UNESCO’s World Heritage Committee expressed its “... deep concern about damage to forests, but also to the fields and plantations of local communities, caused by the flooding caused by the partial impoundment of the Mékin dam and the extremely fragile situation of the property due to the threats it faces” (UNESCO 2017). A monitoring committee of the Ministry of the Environment concluded in 2017 that Hydro Mékin, which carried out an environmental and social impact assessment in 2011, had failed to implement the measures identified by the assessment and called for sanctions against the company for flouting regulations.

According to Exim Bank’s environment policy, its loan disbursement is conditioned by the approval of an environmental impact assessment, although the standards for this assessment are based on the host country’s laws and regulations, and no feedback or revisions to the plan are usually made by the Bank (Chen & Landry 2018: 567). Nonetheless, Exim Bank’s policy stipulates the need to halt financial support should the implementation unit not take remedial or preventive measures (Gallagher 2013: 6). But at Hydro-Mékin there appears to be a significant gap in terms of rigorous enforcement and monitoring of social and environmental compliance by Exim Bank, the Chinese contractor and the Cameroonian authorities.

With the project now being officially handed over to the Cameroonian government, the primary responsibility for carrying out measures to mitigate the legacy of environmental and social issues lies with the Cameroonian state. MINFOF initiated a major development in 2019 by formally appointing participants to a multi-stakeholder platform for the Dja area (See Ministerial Decision of March 20, 2019 to formalise the Stakeholders Platform of Dja Reserve, No 121 D/MINFOF/SETAT/SG/DFAP/DCP/CCJ/CCOOP). This platform could

be a route for stakeholders—including the public enterprise Hydro-Mékin and the Chinese contractors and subcontractors hired for extra periods to carry out maintenance and training on site—to agree and deliver on better social and environmental commitments.

Chinese small- and medium-sized timber companies: everyday innovation and practiced elusiveness

The simple formal situation of one area of forest being exploited by one logging company rarely applies in Cameroon (Cerutti et al. 2011). Various, sometimes many, partners appear to operate through the same license. Companies buy into other existing enterprises. Companies with trucks have major leverage and many barter arrangements take place, offering equipment, or equipment-use, for timber. The same can be said for many Chinese business operators in the Dja forest area, the majority of which are small- and medium-sized timber companies specialized in sawmilling. Our fieldwork shows that at least two Chinese-owned sawmill operations are not listed by MINFOF—company B in Town W and Company E in Town X as described below.

SOFOHNY is the timber company with the largest interests in the Dja area in terms of forest area under its control. The company, owned by Chinese investors and with senior Chinese staff, produces logs, sawn wood, plywood and veneer. MINFOF data suggest that the company has increased its production across these product types in recent years, producing 27,000 m<sup>3</sup> in 2018. SOFOHNY has two forest concessions (FMUs) peripheral to the Dja reserve, in Haut-Nyong, and Dja and Lobo. The former is currently being actively exploited, the latter yet to be so. SOFOHNY also sources timber from six other companies. Indications of illegal exploitation were revealed on site by an independent observation mission led by an NGO in 2016 (FODER 2017). Compliance with the provisions of Article 63 of the 1994 Forest Law on forest management—on forest inventory, reforestation, regeneration, sustained yield logging and the construction of infrastructure—was not evident on the ground in the two FMUs SOFOHNY managed near Dja in 2016. Similarly, the portion destined for neighboring villages of the annual forest royalty that SOFOHNY is required to pay (the distribution is supposed to be: the State 50%, neighboring councils 40%, and neighboring villages 10%) was not evident on the ground (FODER 2017).

Our fieldwork uncovers three other Chinese-linked sawmills without FMUs based in Town W near Dja as well as four additional sawmills in regions more broadly connected with Dja—one Chinese sawmill operating in Town X, east region; two in Town Y, east region; and one in Town Z, south region. Among these seven Chinese-linked investments, the one in Town Z also stands out from the rest for its recent effort to invest more than US\$1 million in joining with Vicwood-Thany with a view to purchasing a concession from a European company. The owner of this business is reported to have made his fortune from trading in Bubinga—being well-known amongst the Chinese timber trading community as one of the few to be able to trade in Bubinga despite partial ban of exportations. It is understood that this owner's interest in obtaining a concession and investing in timber processing stems from increased enforcement of regulations against Bubinga exports. However, despite this heightened regulation, the owner of one company in Town W admits to being well-connected with important figures in the Cameroonian government and in 2019 had started to invest in the processing of certain rare woods, including Bubinga and Wenge as the company's main business operation.

The remaining five Chinese-linked sawmills share similar business characteristics. For example, the other two companies A and B in Town W near Dja have about 10 Chinese and 50 Cameroonian staff but export logs and lumber primarily to China and Vietnam,



occasionally to neighboring countries. Their production volume is still relatively modest. Company A was planning expansion at the time of our fieldwork. It needs about 4,000 to 5,000 m<sup>3</sup> of logs per month but produces about 800 m<sup>3</sup> or 20 containers of sawn wood. With the installation of a new plywood plant, Company A aims to increase its monthly output to 40 containers and broaden its export market to include the Middle East region. These sawmills claim to buy raw logs from those with official titles (held mainly by Cameroonian nationals, but occasionally by French and Lebanese) in addition to council and municipal forests, but, according to representatives of the environment ministry, as well as their own admission in some cases, they also source timber from village areas in Dja and Lobo in the non-permanent forest domain (informal/illegal logging).

Consistent with earlier research on China's private enterprises in China (Gu 2009; Shen 2012), the biographical journeys of many of these sawmill owners in Cameroon's forestry sector is representative of Chinese private investors' strong entrepreneurial spirit, flexibility and adaptability to changes in markets, and higher than average levels of risk-taking investment behavior. For example, Mr. X, the owner of Company A in Town W, like many of his contemporaries at the time when the Chinese economy was opening substantially, decided to leave the comparative security of his job in local government and, having been introduced to timber trading by friends, 'jumped into the sea (*xiahai*)' to set up in private business in the late 1980s. Cameroon was not the first overseas destination for his investment adventure in forestry. In 2013, he came to Southern Africa for the first time, but the Chinese market for round logs for furniture at that time was rather gloomy, while that for veneer and other timber products seemed to be growing. Mr. X then decided to venture into wood processing and came to Cameroon in the mid-2010s. Initially, he set up a factory near Douala with his business partners, but the land on which his factory was located was confiscated by the government to build a stadium for the African Nations Cup, so he moved to Town W in southern Cameroon, taking advantage of its proximity to sources of wood in 2016. His knowledge of market opportunities is primarily obtained through friends and social networks, rather than any Chinese state-led overseas investment policy initiatives.

The trajectory of Mr. Y, owner of Company C in Town X, also reflects this strong entrepreneurial drive—'I came to Africa to make money, not for fun'. He did not have any prior knowledge of the timber sector prior to his arrival to Africa. He was first hired by a Chinese private timber company based in the Republic of Congo for his skills in sports, because the Chinese company apparently found this useful in cultivating good relationships with some key Congolese political figures. Later, he was transferred to Cameroon to manage the company's log depot before quitting in 2011. Through his four-year professional experience in this Congo-based private company, Mr. Y was able to accumulate business knowledge and networks in the timber sector and founded his own company in 2012, dealing in logs. Four years later he ventured into the sawmilling business.

The entrepreneurial drive of Chinese private investors in Africa's timber sector is commonly portrayed, in the Western media if not the Chinese, as a swarm of illegal loggers, traders and millers with total disregard for labour, social and environmental safeguards in host countries (e.g., Le Belzic 2016). In this portrayal, these companies can pursue profit maximisation on the ground without restraint. However, as with the agribusiness and infrastructure cases we describe above, we find more complexity amongst the small-scale Chinese timber processing investors around Dja. The experiences that they shared about their everyday business activities revealed some agility from small technical innovations, working practices and use of kinship networks, but also much routine failure, stasis and ambivalence perhaps typical in small-scale enterprise sectors—and often a lack of the dynamic agency that the popular media discourse perceives Chinese enterprises as having.

A manager of Company B in Town W, established in 2015 by a timber trader from East China, complained of the multiple inspection his company received by agents of the police, the gendarmerie, customs, the Ministry of Labor and MINFOF—“they all come and claim that your wood is illegal or you don’t have some documents, so you must pay.” The same complaint was also shared by Mr. X, who argued that it is ‘inevitable (*nanmian*)’ to pay various informal payments when different inspection missions take place and that he would ‘rather (*ningyuan*)’ make these informal payments to get everything sorted out up front than go through all the administrative and bureaucratic formalities that not only take a long time, but also eventually involve embedded informal transactions. For Chinese informants, these inspections become occasions that punctuate the everyday operations of their business activities with the presence of the Cameroonian state. They are perceived, however, almost automatically as veiled requests for informal payment. These encounters become somewhat ritualized and the Chinese private entrepreneurs cultivate intimate knowledge of their workings and of modes of dealing with them practically. While this generates some preparedness for informal transactions, the Chinese entrepreneurs also described how they negotiate hard to avoid what they deem as excessive payments and expressed interest in getting more legal guidance on issues relating to tax and inspections.

Language is one of the reasons for the difficulty Chinese private entrepreneurs have in navigating the complex regulatory and legal framework of Cameroon’s timber sector. For example, in Mr. X’s company, almost none of the Chinese staff, including Mr. X himself, is conversant in English or French, apart from one young Chinese translator fluent in French who recently joined the company in addition to two local Cameroonian workers with a good conversational level of Mandarin Chinese. However, even for Chinese entrepreneurs fluent in French, like Mr. Y among our informants, to navigate the governance contours of Cameroon’s timber sector, such as securing official documents for investment or export purposes, is to engage with some embedded forms of corruption in the routine functioning of public services (Blundo et al. 2006). And such transactional costs represent significant financial costs for Chinese private investors who often have more limited financial resources than is perhaps commonly presumed.

Mr. Y started his own business in Cameroon by stealing logs; and with the accumulated money, he planned to make a more long-term-oriented investment in the timber value chain. By June 2015, he managed to set up a sawmill in Eastern Cameroon. He described in detail the many everyday difficulties and payments required, in practice, to start and operate his milling company. He estimated that he spent around 60 million CFA (US\$100,000) on getting all the official documents in order before his company could operate officially. Four years after starting up, Mr. Y still complained about being unable to obtain ‘certificat environnemental communautaire’ because, as he said: ‘They asked for 28 million CFA (US\$47,000) for it and that doesn’t even include the bribe I probably need to pay. If you want to accelerate the process, you need to pay extra’. Without this certificate, like other Chinese interviewees, Mr. Y explained that he makes informal payments to get through frequent inspections:

The way government works actually encourages you to make fake documents and to engage in illegal practices. If you do everything legally and formally, they still come to fine you ... I get about two inspection visits a year from each of the government ministries concerned. For instance, MINFOF has local and regional offices. I know the local head of office well so when they come to inspect, it is more like a formality of asking for money and I just pay. At regional level there are two departments—one to check on forestry and wildlife and one to check on processing—so each year they

cost me some million CFA. Then there is MINFOF central—they have been here twice, about renewing my documents. You also need authorization from the Ministry of Water and Energy to dig a well and to install a sewage tank—and this costs 5 to 6 million CFA (US\$10,000)—and from the Ministry of Mining, Industry and Technological Development for both installation and operation of my business, and these two certificates cost 13 million CFA (US\$22,000).

Mr. Y has invested about US\$460,000 in his company and estimates his monthly costs are about US\$29,000 in addition to informal payments. With monthly exports of about 700 m<sup>3</sup> of logs (mainly Ayous) to China, he says his four-year old milling business has brought him little profit. He recently sold part of his stake in the company and decided to return to his old business—a small logging company near Douala selling raw logs for export to China—which, he claims, remains much more profitable: ‘Nowadays, the Chinese who actually make profits are the ones who ask the locals to steal wood. If you open a factory, you don’t make profit, the market is not good’. He told us that he would be interested in selling his remaining stake in the milling business to any interested buyer.

In addition to these embedded informal engagements with Cameroonian public agents, the everyday business operations of Chinese private entrepreneurs are also facilitated by a wide range of formal and informal partnerships and trading arrangements with Cameroonian companies. In the Dja area, these local companies appear to be particularly prominent in the sourcing of timber from community forests and SSV areas.

Mr. Z is a Cameroonian with several small companies and arrangements with Chinese companies who have logging equipment, and with other Chinese companies who buy logs and timber. He also has arrangements with those who have permits to exploit community forests and SSV areas close to Dja. Mr. Z explained that Chinese sawmills are often after Bubinga, Sapelli and other redwoods and they are ‘increasing in number and getting closer to the forest’. He described his role as an intermediary one in helping his Chinese partners access community forest and ‘getting it [the logs] through to Douala’.

Chinese companies pay cash only—they don’t want to deal with communities directly and prefer to deal with intermediaries. Traders come to buy the redwood and bring all the cash to ‘get it through’ to Douala—which I arrange. I have to pay all the forest and transport taxes—then try and negotiate that into the price I get from the Chinese companies. But they keep changing the price and I can’t just go to another Chinese company because they all talk to each other. Vietnamese companies are currently paying higher prices than Chinese.

In these Cameroonian-Chinese partnerships, cash payments without formal papers, or with the recycled papers from other enterprises, continue once the logs or timber leave the mills (Assemble-Mvondo 2020). Traders along the chain and in the ports pay cash or may appear to make no transactions at all while carrying out complex loan, barter and trade arrangements linked, for example, to Chinese-owned shops. There is also a strong sense that the complexity and flexibility of the system are well beyond the power of regulation to have much practical influence.

A Chinese timber traders’ association—yet to emerge from the shadows

Facilitated by IIED and its partners including local Chinese official representations, a Chinese timber association was founded in Douala in 2016. It is chaired by the head of Vicwood-Thantry in Cameroon, a citizen of Hong Kong. Vicwood-Thantry recently acquired

three more FMUs given up by Wijma, making Vicwood-Thany the biggest FMU holder in Cameroon. One of these is close to, but not neighboring, Dja. Its establishment aims to ‘help its members to develop and protect their rights, actively communicate and coordinate with relevant Cameroonian and Chinese agencies, guide its members to abide by local laws and regulations, and to promote Sino-Cameroonian economic cooperation’ (Mayers et al. 2019). However, little activity in pursuit of this objective has yet been carried out and the Association seems to have been mainly a platform for occasional social activities—e.g., the celebration of Chinese spring festivals and organization of basketball matches amongst Chinese communities in Douala.

The Association has found it difficult to meet its intended goals. Numbering between 30 and 40, the membership is extremely varied, reflecting the complexities of Chinese engagement in Cameroon’s timber industry. Private timber traders form the largest group of members. They tend to operate individually or with family members and do not need to legally register their company in Cameroon as long as they can secure their own visas to stay in the country. When the market price of timber back in China drops, some of them (especially those with limited current capital) may temporarily abandon timber trading to pursue other business activities and wait for the timber price to rebound. Other association members include timber trading and, to a lesser degree, shipping companies. Like the small-to medium-scale milling industry described above, these traders, investors and shippers are characterized by a high degree of mobility and informality (Assemble-Mvondo 2020). What is evident is that these various Chinese actors have different business interests amongst each other and they are often themselves in varying degrees of competition and cooperation.

Vicwood-Thany itself appears to have little interest in developing the association. Indeed, as a large-scale concession holder, it has seen its interests best served through involvement in the group of large timber businesses, the Groupement de la Filière Bois du Cameroun (GFBC)—Vicwood-Thany headed this for seven years up to 2019. GFBC has a formal profile and has been consulted by the Cameroonian government in various processes of legal and policy developments and reforms in the timber sector.

Until such time as the members of the Chinese timber association in Cameroon find a way of establishing, operationalising and coordinating their representation, perhaps through a secretariat, to present their positions and dialogue with other local and international stakeholders in timber governance, it seems likely that the association will continue to maintain the place of Chinese timber traders in the shadows rather than bringing them into the light.

#### Early stages of multi-stakeholders dialogue on Dja

In an apparent response to concerns raised by NGOs about social and environmental issues and legal compliance around the Dja area, MINFOF formalized in 2019 an existing stakeholder platform at Dja that had been active in the area since 2017 (See Decision No 121 D/MINFOF/SETAT/SG/DFAP/DCP/CCJ/SSOOP). According to the Ministerial Decision, the mission of the Stakeholder Consultation Framework is to create, “... a synergy of actions between the different stakeholders working to the conservation and development of the biosphere reserve.” Its main responsibilities include: promoting a framework for the permanent exchange of experience between the various conservation and development partners; supporting the efforts of state and non-state partners in the implementation of poaching mitigation initiatives and livelihoods betterment projects; managing conflicts related to the exploitation and conservation of natural resources; and mobilising funding. The actors recognized and requested to be active in the forum include seven international

NGOs, five national and local NGOs, the organisations representing three local rural development conservation projects, protected area authority, and seven economic operators including SudCam-Hévéa, Hydro-Mékin and SOFOHNY.

But the platform still seems weak because it is little known by neighboured villagers. Crucially, the sources of funding to enable the platform to play its role are also as yet unclear. Indigenous people and local communities would also seem to be proportionately under-represented amongst those formally appointed to the platform (in the ministerial decision, there is no representation of local communities). Notable too by their absence in the above stakeholder list are the small enterprises in the timber sector, including the Chinese loggers, millers and traders.

While Chinese middle-size timber actors like SOFONY are included in the Dja stakeholder platform, engagement with them on social-environmental compliance remains particularly difficult. Informants in SOFONY expressed to us their interest in discussions about the European market, laws and regulations so as to enable them to improve their trading position, the entry points on sustainability and local livelihoods seem limited. This company has an established presence and is well enmeshed with timber governance arrangements in Cameroon. One of the managers told us that he is not interested in voicing the challenges the company faces to Cameroonian NGOs or the government because, based on previous experience, he believes nothing will be changed. Addressing this rather fatalistic perception remains a key challenge for further work.

## DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Oversimplified and broad-brush characterization of heterogeneous China-linked actors continues to prevail in Cameroon and elsewhere, in the timber sector in particular. This is in part due to the practiced elusiveness (hard to comprehend/to rank in one box) of these actors themselves—they are difficult to access and engage with. A significant knowledge gap remains about the ‘everyday operations’ of these actors (Cerutti et al. 2011). Improved shared understanding is needed about how these Chinese actors interact on an everyday basis with various components of the governance system in Cameroon’s forestry sector, both horizontally (e.g., across different government ministries) and vertically (e.g., the central, regional and division levels of these government agencies as well as in local communities). Market and regulatory environments for the timber sector in both Cameroon and China are subject to frequent and dynamic changes, which, in turn, practically oblige China-linked timber actors to continuously recalibrate and readjust their own business strategies, tactics and operations in Cameroon. This paper analyses data from the field as a preliminary attempt to unpack such dynamism in the everyday operations of Chinese timber actors.

Very different types of Chinese enterprise are involved in some of the most prominent land uses affecting forests and local livelihoods in the Dja area of Cameroon, ranging from the subsidiary, of the Chinese-owned parent conglomerate, which runs the SudCam rubber plantations, to the Chinese state-owned contractor involved in the Mékin dam, and to the wide range of private Chinese timber companies operating near the Dja forest area and utilising logs therefrom.

Advocacy efforts by national NGOs and international agencies, environment concerns voiced by potential international buyers, and China’s growing awareness of the social-environmental implications of its companies’ overseas operations, particularly state-owned ones, all contributed to SudCam’s decision to halt its further forest conversion plan, which

appears to be holding at the time of writing. With technical assistance of different national and international agencies, the company has taken steps to institutionalize regular dialogue with neighbouring communities and indigenous peoples—thus beginning at least to fulfil social and environmental commitments in both legislation and in international plantation-oriented guidance on stewardship of forests of high conservation value.

The Cameroonian state-owned Hydro-Mékin Corporation built the dam on the Dja river and power plant with Chinese engineering and financial support. This project continues to prove controversial with alleged unmet commitments to local communities and a deep ecological footprint on the Dja reserve. However, as a state-owned asset, the potential exists for the hydro-electric company to mitigate the main social and economic problems created in its development and to support sustainable local livelihoods. Specific actions to encourage the incorporation into Exim Bank's loan lending policy of more stringent social and environmental standards and more rigorous monitoring mechanisms would also be timely, such as public disclosure of environmental and social impact assessments of Exim Bank's funded projects and an effective grievance mechanism.

Chinese forestry companies operating small-sized sawmills and sourcing at least some of their timber from the Dja forests, appear to have similar business models based on relatively short-term profit maximisation. Their operations put exploitation pressure on both community forest and other designated non-permanent forest domains and tend to be characterized by unstable sources of wood supply, low traceability of timber and low credibility of administrative documents authorising the movement of. However, this is not an unconstrained free-for-all. The stories shared by our Chinese interviewees reveal how their everyday business operations are enabled by and embedded within the informal rules and practices—often in collusion with public agents and local business partners—that condition the 'real' functioning of timber governance and administration system in Cameroon. Obviously, their short term business model (*profit maximisation hunters*) is contrary with sustainable forest management (SFM).

Precisely because of this embedded informality, the modes of the everyday operations of these Chinese companies are highly fluid and subject to frequent adaptations and modifications. Recent years have witnessed substantial changes in the way Chinese and other businesses are operating in the timber sector—delayed payments, barter arrangements, alternative traded products as payments, multiple owners, and enterprises within the same mills or parent company with different equipment and product lines owned by different actors. Such of informalization of Chinese extractive activities has already been observed in Ghana and elsewhere (Putzel et al. 2014; McKenzie 2019). Whilst it is possible that innovations in some of these practices could provide the basis for a more sustainable sector, these dynamics and features in the sector are not yet well understood and captured. There is a strong sense that policy and regulation is currently being left far behind—that such a 'forest governance' behaviour may not yet be in the hands of Cameroonian citizens and their government.

The stronger intervention by the Cameroonian state along with the incipient company behavioural changes we observe in the SudCam rubber plantation stand in contrast to the continued and practiced quotidian informality that characterises many of the Chinese medium- and small-sized timber operators. This difference suggests a form of "selective enforcement (McKenzie 2019)" by the Cameroonian state to exert and consolidate state authority over its natural resources. It goes beyond the main focus of this article to explore the rationale behind this pattern of selectivity, but our analysis appears to confirm that it is at least shaped by "global conservation and extraction priorities (McKenzie 2019)", considering that the global interests in the SudCam project with the attendant international

conservation pressures and advocacy contribute to the Cameroonian state's more hands-on governance efforts.

Chinese actors in the timber sector are heterogeneous, not just in terms of their business areas (trader, logger, processor), their scales, their financial structure, their level of legality, and their relations with the governance system. This diversity suggests that different ways to engage and target actions are needed. For small-scale actors, like the sawmills in Town W, their operational difficulties could be the focus, bringing in relevant Cameroonian policymakers to listen and start engaging. Dialogue could draw on examples of local or foreign companies of similar size which are recognized as engaging in good forest management—to spotlight how they have become thus recognized, and what the benefits are.

Last but not the least, indigenous people and local communities rights in the Dja landscape area would seem to have a range of legitimate complaints with government. Delay and non-compliance with many commitments by economic operators and the State itself feed their current sense of exasperation. Indeed, although restrictions on the access rights of local and indigenous communities to land and forest resources began during the colonial period, post-colonial administration did not change such a regime of rights restrictions (see Table 1). On the contrary, the situation has worsened, in particular with the arrival on the site of major stakeholders whose activities further strengthen the regime of access restrictions (notably a rubber and electricity dam companies). This contributes to weakening the socio-economic situation of grassroots people. Hence the lack of support (illegitimacy) from local communities and indigenous people for the land use plan of this zone and related activities. From the majority point of view of local communities/indigenous people, the dominant actors, such as the state and its outgrowths (administration, conservation and state owned dam company), companies with Chinese capital (logging and rubber) and others INGOs (conservation), are perceived as adversaries who have come to bring misery to their native land instead of local development.

In any case, Chinese-owned enterprises operating in the forestry sector (in the Dja area and elsewhere in Cameroon) are not homogeneous and their behaviors are correlatively diversified with regard to the legal framework and forest resources. With a view to improving their current unsustainable practices, it is necessary for the forest administration and related NGOs to work in the following aspects:

- ▶ Initiate a process of awareness-raising and dialogue with Chinese-capital economic operators on linkage to the sustainable forests management (SFM) by taking into account their dimensions (size) and related practices;
- ▶ Establish a traceability program for wood products exported to Asia in general and China in particular, with the collaboration of the authorities of importing countries;
- ▶ Make an annual follow-up on the socio-economic commitments made by economic operators towards local communities, so that social sustainability is effective and thus reduces conflicts between dominant stakeholders (administration, companies, INGOS, projects) and local people.

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