

ATTAINING INTEGRATED WATER RESOURCE MANAGEMENT (IWRM) THROUGH ENVIRONMENTAL DEMOCRACY FOR MOUNTAIN COMMUNITIES

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Mountains are important water sources for local, urban and mountain communities. Despite this fact, mountain communities in Cameroon experiences acute water problems such as water shortages, poor quality and water conflicts. This can be attributed to poverty, lack of basic knowledge in relation to water availability, quality and use. Water shortages is caused by the human activities carried out around water catchments such as farming, planting of trees that consumed large amount of water(e.g. eucalyptus trees), not leaving out the effects of climate change.

Poor water quality can be attributed to the hilly nature of most mountain communities that makes it difficult to access portable or treated water. We have for example the case of Bamendankwe a mountain community found in the North West region of Cameroon Central Africa. Bamendankwe is one of the highest peaks in the Bamenda highland, measuring about 2850m above sea level. With a population of about 18000 inhabitants, the Bamendakwe fondom owns a land surface area of over 15000hectares 80% of which is rural and concentrated on the hill slopes. The region is blessed with abundant natural/geographical resources like lakes, waterfalls, Basins etc. This community serves as the principal source of water that supplies the capital city of the North West region Bamenda. The Cameroon National Water Corporation (SNEC) now CAMWATER collects and treat water from this region, that supplies Bamenda town but unfortunately, the community does not have access to portable water given that the treatment centre is located at the foot of the mountain(i.e. at the entrance of the village). The capacity of the centre is such that the corporation finds it difficult to pump the treated water back into the village. As a consequence, the community is bound to consume untreated water that expose them to water borne diseases such as dysentery, cholera, diahirra, typhoid fever, etc.

Water as any other natural resource is subject to generating conflict. The potentials for generating conflicts is unlimited because of the physical and economic characteristics of water, mobility, variability and uncertainty in supply, indivisibility, diversity in uses, conflicting cultural and social values, interdependency amongst users, economic potentials and power, etc.

Due to the inaccessibility to fresh or portable water by mountain communities, given that fresh water in these area are under increasing stress and that MDGS (8) commit governments to half by2015, the proportion of people without sustainable access to safe drinking water and basic sanitation, knowledge about water availability, quality and use is essential for the local and mountain dwellers so as to enhance effective management. This can be achieve through Integrated Water resource Management(IWRM); wherein all the stakeholders in the water sector including the local population will have to be involved in water management as an environmental resource. But unfortunately in Cameroon, the IWRM regime in Cameroon is flawed with a number of setbacks such as ignorance, corruption, lack of IWRM principles in practice, lack of coordination, lack of institutional capacity and poverty, etc. An example is the Bamendankwe mountain community aforementioned. Due to the

inaccessibility of portable water already mention above, the community resorted to IWRM by creating small water committees in some quarters. With very little fund, these committees construct water reservoirs with little capacity that cannot even supply the respective quarters. Worst still, not all the quarters have such committees as there exist only six of such water committees in the entire village and the water quality is not tested.

Effective IWRM can be attained through ENVIRONMENTAL DEMOCRACY given that water is an integral part of the environment. Environmental democracy is about governments being transparent, accountable and involving people in decisions that affects their environment and the term first came into light during the Earth Summit organised by the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development held in Rio de Janeiro on 5 – 8th of June 1992. This summit propounded a number of principles or declarations one of which was principle 10. Principle 10 embodies the notion of environmental democracy and it states:

“Environmental issues are best handled with the participation of all concerned citizens, at the relevant level. At the national level, each individual shall have appropriate access to information concerning the environment that is held by public authorities, including information on hazardous materials and activities in their communities, and the opportunity to participate in decision-making processes. States shall facilitate and encourage public awareness and participation by making information widely available. Effective access to judicial and administrative proceedings including redress and remedy shall be provided.”

This principle is based on the premise that, environmental issues are best addressed with the involvement of all concerned citizens. To make possible citizen involvement, principle 10 list three fundamental “access rights” that empowers citizens as seen below

Access to information

This refers to the ability of citizens to have information about their immediate environment so as to be able to make meaningful decisions and choices. The members of the different water committees and inhabitants of Bamendankwe have very little information and knowledge about water quality and the causes of water scarcity which is plaguing their community. It is this ignorance that causes most mountain communities to carryout agricultural activities around water catchments and other activities that has a negative impact on water.

Public participation

That citizen should be given the opportunity to participate timely and meaningfully and influence decisions, general policies and strategies on environmental management. Stakeholder participation is a core principle in IWRM. Thus effective water development and management should be based on a participatory approach, involving users, planners and policy makers at all levels and this can only be achieved where environmental democracy is practice. Effective participation by all stakeholders will enhance effective water management in mountain communities.

Access to justice

That citizens should have timely and affordable access to justice where an environmental right has been infringed or were one suffers environmental harm. As earlier mention, water resource conflicts are inevitable. Due to the existence of conflicts and the negative impacts it has on the environment in general and water sector in particular, an effective mechanism for redress has to be put in place. In

Cameroon, we have the **1996 Framework Law on Environmental Management** and the **1998 Water Law** that provides different forums for dispute settlement ranging from Arbitration, traditional authorities, the Administration, the courts, municipal councils etc. A perfect example is Bamendankwe where the community does not have access to portable water despite the fact that SNEC collects and treat water that supply Bamenda town from this mountain. This community has never received any attention or compensation despite several petitions to the Administration. Instead they where taken to court by SNEC when they protested. As a result of this, not only the community is facing water shortages but the entire Northwest region of Cameroon.

In conclusion, promoting environmental democracy will enhance effective IWRM in mountain communities who due to their peculiar nature does not have access to fresh or portable water.