

Why do Logging Firms Reject Environmental Label in Central Africa? A Case Study of Forest Certification in Cameroon

Pourquoi les firmes forestières rejettent-elles le label environnemental en Afrique centrale? Cas de la certification forestière au Cameroun

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Abstract

This article aims to understand why extractive firms in the industrial logging industry in central Africa are reluctant to certify or label their activities. The methodology is based on three empirical case studies of logging companies in Cameroon: one opposed to certification and labeling (the model), the other is in the process of being certified (intermediate case) and the last is certified (negative case). The preferred option followed by this study was to avoid the copying of the first case by prospecting an intermediate case. The "negative" case permitted the model to be saturated. The comparative analysis of data collected highlighted some key obstacles to the commitment to environmental labeling: corruption, low turnover, high certification cost and the source of capital.

Keywords: Forest governance, high certification cost, low turnover, certification schemes, corruption, source of capital.

Resume

L'objectif de ce papier est de comprendre pourquoi les entreprises d'exploitations forestières en Afrique central sont retissant à certifier leurs produits. La méthodologie adoptée porte sur trois entreprises forestière au Cameroun: une opposée à la certification, le deuxième est en instance de certification et la dernière est certifiée. L'objectif est d'éviter que le premier exemple soit suivi en prospectant un cas intermédiaire. Le cas négatif permet la saturation du modèle. L'Analyse comparative des données collectées met en exergue la corruption, le cout élevé de certification, le chiffre d'affaire et les sources du capital comme facteurs limitant la certification au Cameroun.

Mots- clefs : Gouvernance forestière, coûts de certification élevés, chiffre d'affaires faibles, certification, corruption, sources du capital

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Introduction

The originality and major contribution of this study is the empirical analysis of the paradox and rationale behind logging companies' low commitment rate to Forest Stewardship Council (FSC) certification standard. Indeed, private actors in favor of a sustainable labeling of their activities believe that forest certification, "despite its high cost", is "essential" for logging firms' economic development. It also represents a resilience pledge in times of crisis, helps to expand and sell their products in Western markets particularly sensitive to environmental issues. However, the relationships between some certification schemes and their local, public and private customers and interlocutors are overshadowed by opportunistic and clientelistic behaviors. These dilemmas nonetheless provide a set of private and informal benefits to actors involved, and serve to dissuade them from a non-reversible commitment to sustainable forest management.

With the creation of the FSC in 1993, the logging sector was a precursor of transnational private standards' emergence for sustainable labeling (Fouilleux, 2013, Giessen et al., 2016). The proliferation of these standards in the late 1990s was extended to other natural and agricultural resource production and management fields (for example: fisheries, palm oil, sugar cane, soybean, coffee, agro-fuels, cocoa, etc.), (Ponte and Cheyns, 2013). The common feature of these private certification schemes was to promote a social and environmental sustainable approach of production fields based on incentive instruments. They claimed a third-party status towards States on the one hand, and producers and buyers on the other (Bernstein and Cashore, 2012, Haufler, 2003). Certification schemes' attractiveness was based on positioning labeled products' opportunities in Western markets and also on improving the brand image of these firms towards their customers and the general public (Shouten et al., 2011). However, despite the independent and virtuous advantages promoted by these standards (Durst et al., 2006; Gulbrandsen, 2004), their penetration rate and anchoring level in tropical timber production and marketing chains remains weak and controversial (Seyller et al., 2016; Auld et al., 2008; Rametsteiner and Simula, 2003; Cashore, 2002).

In the forests of Central Africa, it is very scarce to find logging companies who are enthusiastically engaged in sharing their experiences with private certification. As illustration, the overall FSC-certified area (forest label leader in Central Africa) was estimated at about five million hectares in 2015, less than 4% of the Congo Basin forest area. In Cameroon, about 13% of logged forests were certified at the same period (Ndoumbe Berock, 2017; Cerutti et al., 2014). In other words, 87% of these forests are not under a certification scheme². However, it is widely known that certification provides many benefits to companies especially in terms of

²The trend has been the same since then

reputation, image, search for new business partners and financial profitability (Kouna Eloundou, 2006). In the same vein, the Central Africa Forests Commission (COMIFAC) has set up a sub-regional program aimed at providing financial support to companies to encourage them engage in Forest Certification (PCAP, 2014)³. This may certainly be a one-off incentive. Nevertheless, this support is not less important in the forest sector. In such a context, one would have logically expected all companies in this sector to rush to forest certification in Central Africa. Thus, in view of the above, *what could be the obstacles to logging companies' commitment to certification in Central Africa?*

Through the Cameroonian experience, we propose the following assumption: the low penetration rate and the limited anchoring of forest certification in Central Africa is due to the cost of long-term certification, the clientelism of private actors in the process of certification, low corporate turnover and capital origin.

The objective of this research is fourfold: The first is to present the theoretical framework underlying the certification processes in the forest sector; this provides a general understanding of the rationale behind the low commitment of logging firms to certification. The second deals with the methodological approach used to examine this weak commitment. The third presents the main findings and the fourth their interpretation in line with the dominant literature in the field.

Theoretical Framework for Certification Processes in the Logging Sector

Forest, through the exploitation of their soil and sub-soil resources, is one of the major supply sources of globalization marketing goods. It feeds various exploitation processes, helps in sending natural resources from producing developing countries to developed countries considered as major consumers (Lambin et al., 2011; Pippla, 2013; Karsenty and Ferron, 2013). Since the late 1990s, various schemes have been implemented to internalize the negative externalities linked to the exploitation of these natural resources (Fouilleux, 2013; Seyller et al., 2016; Giessen et al., 2016). Multiple warnings, political and economic pressures from transnational conservation NGOs and international environmental institutions relayed by environmental activists' movements have generalized practices in forest exploitation with low ecological and socially equitable impact. Albeit major international mobilizations' effects barely changed actors' practices in the field, their contribution had real impacts in setting up sustainable issues in tropical forests' management (Humphreys, 2006; Arts and Buizer, 2009; Singer and Giessen, 2017). In spite of awareness campaigns and international initiatives in favor of sustainable forest exploitation, literature underlines some gaps and deficiencies of these

³Certified Forest Exploitation Promotion Program

virtuous ambitions often less compatible with the bureaucratic functioning and the complexity of the links between public and private spheres in tropical States most affected by private governing initiatives (Giessen, 2013; Agrawal et al., 2008). These include, for instance, States' fragility and the prevalence of private interest on general interest in countries with high tropical forest potential (Karsenty and Ongolo, 2012); the weak consideration of the issue of power relationships between actors in forest policies (Krott et al., 2014; Burns et al., 2017) and the influence of aid agencies' interferences with governance as well as forest reform policies' orientation in tropical countries (Krott, 2005; Karsenty and Ongolo, 2012; Wibowo and Giessen, 2015; Rahman and Giessen, 2017). Salient investigations also highlight how cross-border concerns and inter-dependent issues require States, international organizations and civil society to integrate many changes and transformations in line with market developments (Sahide and Giessen, 2015; Kusonyola Kalonga et al., 2016; Fouilleux, 2013).

From Reinicke's (2000) viewpoint, solutions to globalization's excesses can be found in both sincere and equitable exchanges as well as in effective and efficient management of knowledge and information. In the same vein, Witte et al. (2005) point out that these solutions could be found, among others, in a correction of both market failures and State-led governmental processes, that is, a quest for a "good" mix of regulation and incentive. In this respect, Reinicke (1998), Witte et al. (2005) and Johansson and Gun Lidestav (2011); encourage a strong involvement of private actors in public actions' management, particularly through public-private partnerships and the strengthening of "public policy's global networks". In the same vein, John Ruggie (2004) believes that we are probably at the beginning of a new era where public action is no longer just a matter of public entities, but also, a concerted process of a constellation of actors. In summary, a form of *"fundamental reconstitution of the global public domain away from the one that equated the "public" in international politics with States and the interstate realm, to one in which the very system of States is becoming embedded in a broader, albeit still thin and partial, institutionalized global arena concerned with the production of global public goods"* John Ruggie (2004)

Following these findings on plural demand in sustainable developmental initiatives in natural resources' management, private firms and conservation transnational NGOs brought about the CSR⁴ notion, largely inspired by Freeman's (1984) investigation, which encourages companies to further internalize the negative externalities of their production activities (Zadek, 2004; Martin, 2002). For the CSR promoters, the profit maximization objective of corporations is not incompatible with stakeholders' social and environmental well-being and that of

⁴Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR)

recipients of production circuits or end-products (Freeman, 1984). Similarly, Porter and Kramer (2007) point out that CSR is a source of competitive advantage for companies which adopt its principles and practices. As such, it is proven to be a successful element for a firm if its strategies are well integrated. These studies helped formulating many conceptual and normative tools in support of CSR initiatives. Over the past two decades, some authors as Glasbergen et al. (2007) surveyed multi-stakeholder partnerships or dialogues. Likewise, the studies of Bernstein (2011), Boström (2006) and Beishem and Dingwerth (2008) highlight the inclusive and participatory dimension of CSR, which very often refers to a guarantor of both effectiveness and legitimacy. Other works focused on collaborative governance context which consists in identifying not only the conditions, but also, variables likely to improve the effectiveness of these public-private partnerships. Collaborative governance principles inspired by public management literature is frequently used in the field of CSR (Zadek and Radovitch, 2006). Based on the above-mentioned literature, this work aims at enriching this theoretical and conceptual body with empirical evidence and practical realities on forest certification processes in Cameroon.

The FSC scheme: a dominant, flexible and controversial eco-label

FSC certification system began in 1993 under the impetus of the World Wildlife Fund (WWF) and the collaboration of other conservation organizations like *Greenpeace* and *Friends of the Earth*. The FSC certification label includes a set of members from various socio-professional categories as non-governmental organizations (NGOs), activists or not in various environmental and human rights' fields (Johansson and Gun Lidestav, 2011). They are also actors in trade unions and economic sectors (industries and timber trade), just to name the few. FSC is structured on ten principles and criteria for sustainable forest management related to law enforcement, land tenure, indigenous peoples' rights and environmental impacts (Smouts, 2001; Humphreys, 2006; Cashore, 2002). FSC certification targets both public and private firms specialized in logging, processing and marketing sectors. To obtain an FSC certification, one must comply with a highly codified process (see Box 1 in Appendix).

FSC offers its expertise to its customers so as to guarantee consumers that timber sold on international and - particularly - European markets comes from sustainably managed tropical forests. It aims at certifying it through timber legal origin's traceability process and its compliance with standards and regulations in force in producing countries. FSC certification

process leads to products' labeling from two label types: FSC label 100%⁵ and the Mixed Sources label⁶.

Thus, any wood cargo stamped with one of these two labels assures the consumer of a product from a certified forest where any of its production and transformation process meets social and environmental sustainable requirements. For some authors, this certification is considered expensive due to the inherent costs at the sole customers' expense, that is, certificate applicants (Hemphreys, 2006; Kouna Eloundou, 2008; Auld et al., 2008). To better describe the FSC certification system, Smouts (2001) and Humphries and Kainer (2006) points out that it is particularly atypical in that it "sets standards, controls evaluators, awards its label and earns money back ".

However, FSC also functions as a modular certification system adaptable to a panel of customers with varied resources and capacities. This alternative device is offered free of charge to small customers thanks to private donations and governmental aids. Such support may come from bilateral or multilateral cooperation agencies as the German Technical Cooperation Agency (GTCA) or the European Commission. They can also come from private philanthropic organizations as Foundations (Ford, Mac Arthur) or granted by some conservation transnational NGOs like the WWF and IUCN. In the Private Forest Certification Standards' galaxy, FSC is often touted as the 'best' forest certification system on the market, due, in part, to its adaptability to different forest types and to varied economic and social contexts (Fouilleux, 2013; Karsenty and Ferron, 2013).

Notwithstanding the above-mentioned virtues and advantages, the relative flexibility of the FSC certification process represents a major hindrance to a more rigorous implementation which can guarantee the sustainable management of tropical forests, especially those in the Congo Basin which are under strong human and economic conversion pressures. In recent years, numerous works (Pappila, 2013; McGinley and Cubbage, 2011; Johansson and Lidestav, 2011) underlined certification standards being subject to various challenges and denunciations, including by some actors in the natural resource production chain. Criticisms as regard promoters of these labels are particularly linked to that they are less demanding, very accommodating, not very objective and even connive during their audit missions with their customers.

⁵ The product (100% fiber) comes from FSC-certified forests.

⁶ The product is made from a minimum of 70% wood fiber from FSC-certified forests and /or pre-consumer recycled fiber, and up to 30% of controlled wood and /or pre-consumer recycled fiber

However, FSC certification scheme's strengths (transparency requirements, traceability of timber industries, good consideration of social and ecological concerns, etc.) seem to broaden the impact of this label in the forest certification global market. For instance, nearly 91 million hectares of forest were FSC-certified in 2007, including 2,438,079 in Africa, 37,391,916 in America, 1,642,224 in Asia, 48,065,909 in Europe and 1,246,648 in Oceania (Cerutti et al, 2014; Eba'a Atyi et al., 2013). Experts reveal that the global certified forest area according to FSC principles and criteria is significantly growing worldwide. They also predict a growth rate of about 5% in Africa, especially in the Congo Basin in 2017⁷.

Methodology: Combine Cases and Variables to Better Understand Corporate Rationalities

This work aims at examining the paradox and key reasons behind logging firms' low commitment rate to the labeling process of their activities in the Congo Basin. To achieve this goal, we made use of a comparative research advocated by Max Weber (1968).

Social science textbooks generally distinguish two comparative methodological⁸ conceptions: the first highlights the "invariants" and common universal categories to phenomena independently analyzed from their specificities. The second deals with each context's specificities while highlighting each phenomenon's fundamental properties. Indeed, there is a link between the universal and the cultural. Comparison serves to subsume the different national experiences and leads to a logical apprehension of the internal construction of various phenomena.

Ragin (1987) outlines a kind of "synthetic" comparative method which combines the strengths of the case-by-case approach (qualitative) and the variable approach (quantitative), particularly suited to the comparative analysis of a limited number of cases⁹. For Blondel (1994), comparatists should be at the "*middle range*" level (between Universalists and culturalists), given that "*in light with Ragin's works, it is not unlikely to gradually link case studies and variable analyzes.*"

By combining case-based and variable approaches, the objective is, among others, to better understand the driving forces behind logging companies' low commitment to certification with regard to their activities. As a matter of fact, the corporate suitability sampling used in this research follows this explanatory logic. Three cases are taken into account: A certification-

⁷ The FSC website visited on January 04, 2018

⁸ Cecile Vigor (2005) *The comparison in social sciences*, Paris, La Decouverte, p 51.

⁹ Ragin C. (1987) *The Comparative Method*, Berkeley, University of California Press.

hostile firm (model), one in the certification process (intermediate case) and another one certified (negative case).

The preferred option was to avoid reifying the first case by putting into perspective an intermediate case, while seeking to saturate this model by resorting to a "negative" case. These cases were associated with two variables: the long-term certification cost and certification schemes' clientelism.

These variables were systematically treated and combined with the study of the three cases. The combination of case-based and variable approaches was chosen for its potential and representativeness to give the most objective possible meaning to the empirical reality linked to the commitment to forest certification in Cameroon. In line with Hassine and Ghozzi-Nékhili (2017), this approach allowed a better understanding of social phenomena from their exploration and representation in a given context. In the same vein, Ayerbe and Missonier (2007) emphasize on that the recognition of a case study (combined in this study with the variable-based approach) lies on results' internal validity, which in this framework refers to those obtained from the statistical analysis of the sample¹⁰.

Evrard *et al.* (2003) also point out the case study approach's legitimacy and validity based both on explaining observed phenomena and monitoring a rigorous methodological process which helps to better analyze them. Thus, this research makes use of the above-mentioned methodological principles.

Table 1: Synthetic comparative method combining case-based and variable approaches

Case		Certification-hostile firm (Model)	Firm in the certification process (Intermediate case)	Certified firm (Negative case)
Variables				
Long-term certification cost	Very high cost	Yes	Yes	Yes
	Average cost	No	No	No
	Low cost	No	No	No
Certification schemes' clientelism	Outrageous clientelism	Yes	No	No
	Moderate clientelism	No	Yes	No
	Low clientelism	No	No	Yes

Source: Adapted from Ragin (1987)

It is worth recalling the origin or status of companies surveyed. Indeed, most firms operating in the timber sector in Central Africa are subsidiaries of European (France, Italy, Belgium) and Asian (China) multinationals. Due to the increasing consideration of environmental concerns and challenges on fighting against deforestation by Western citizens and policymakers, the certification of tropical timber productions has become a particularly important strategic concern for firms with European capital. Tropical logging activities'

¹⁰Even though the author clearly emphasises on a statistical analysis of the sample

labelling also acts as an incentive lever on sustainability's consideration by commercial actors in the timber sector whose economic prosperity depends on their ability to integrate European markets' various demands where most of their productions are channelled.

Table 2: Distribution of logging concessions in Cameroon by capital origin

Capital Origin	Capital's Country of origin	Number of companies	Number of logging concessions (Forest Management Units (FMUs))	Total volume exploited (hectares)	Percentage Total area
EUROPE	France	08	14 FMUs	856,490	15%
	Italy	17	27 FMUs	1,732,428	31%
	The Netherlands	05	12 FMUs	637,212	12%
	Belgium	03	03 FMUs	187,034	03%
	Germany	01	01 FMUs	162,268	03%
	Greece	01	01 FMUs	148,642	03%
Total EUROPE		35	58 FMUs	3, 724,074	67%
ASIA	China	06	10 FMUs	663,288	12%
Total ASIA		06	10 FMUs	663,288	12%
AFRICA	Cameroon	16	22 FMUs	1, 036,664	21%
Total AFRICA		16	22 FMUs	1, 036,664	21%
Total General		57	90 FMUs	5, 558,918	100%

Source: Authors from field data

This table reveals five main countries highly involved in logging in the Cameroonian territory: Italy, France, the Netherlands, China and Cameroon itself. Nearly sixty (60) firms are specialized in logging and more than ninety (90) in log processing (Ndoumbe Berock, 2017). This competitive situation increases pressure on forests, each firm seeking to maximize profit. As part of our research, the certification-hostile firm (model) is of national origin while the other two (intermediate and negative cases) are foreign multinationals. One would have thought that a firm's origin or status would be enough to understand the low corporate commitment to forest certification while a Cameroonian firm is also hostile to this process. Indeed, their commitment level varies according to the long-term certification's very high cost and varying perceptions with regard to certification schemes' clientelism. Therefore, the corporate origin or status is proven to be essential. However, the formal forest sector's contribution to the low-income countries' GDP, especially in the Congo Basin, seems to heavily weigh on companies.

Table 3: Contribution of the formal forest sector to the Congo Basin countries' GDP

Countries	Contribution of the forest sector to GDP	Number of direct jobs ¹¹	Main destinations of wood exports
Cameroon	10% (2013)	19,000 (2013)	-Logs and processed (20%) in Europe, more than 60% in Asia (China)
Republic of Congo	7 % (2014)	9,424 (2013)	- Logs and edged: China (more than 50%), Europe (second destination)
Gabon	3.5 % (2009)	14,121 (2009)	- Logs and processed: Asia (first destination) and Europe
Equatorial Guinea	01 % (2012)	3,000 (2012)	- Logs: China (68%), France, Portugal and Spain (the rest) - Plating: Spain (46%), France, Portugal and China (the rest)
Central African Republic	15% (2014)	6,000 (2009)	- Logs: China (31.4%), Italy (16.3%), Spain (15.9%), France (10.7%), Germany (10.7%), Portugal (6.1%). -Edged: Spain (18.4%), China (28.9%), Belgium (17.6%), United Kingdom (10.3%)
Democratic Republic of Congo	2.5% (2013)	22,000 (2013)	The formal sector is less important (mainly for Europe)

Source: From Ndoumbe Berock (2017)

Such a weight is likely to influence the firms' commitment to voluntarily adhere to very costly social and environmental actions. While GDP appears to be a determinant variable, it is included in this study as a driving variable: the long-term certification cost.

In some cases, market could be considered as an explanatory variable to the corporate low commitment to forest certification. Indeed, since the middle of the 2000s in emerging markets, most wood harvested in the Congo Basin forests are primarily exported to the main Asian economies (China and India) where the demand for wood has increased in recent years (COMCAM, 2015)¹². This increased pressure on forest resources is not only directly done (increased timber consumption), but also, indirectly as the forest land's conversion rate into agro-industrial plantations has increased (Palm oil, Soybean, etc.). The high demand for both industrial wood and timber led to an increase in forest allocations to transnational logging companies. In most cases, however, they operate in partnership with local firms. Some of them play the role of "nominees" just to facilitate administrative formalities with regard to the legal compliance of transnational companies which have control over the actual forests' exploitation chain. In both cases, the direct pressure on forests with timber exploitation, but especially the indirect one related to the conversion of forest lands into agro-industrial plantations induces significant environmental and social effects on forest ecosystems' sustainability.

Logging's environmental and social issues are multiple. Some are closely linked to deforestation like the biodiversity loss and increasing greenhouse gas emissions. Many social phenomena are also associated with the unsustainable exploitation of primary forests. This

¹¹It is very tedious to appreciate indirect jobs, the data in this area being very heterogeneous.

¹²Database on the Cameroonian timber marketing at the Port Authority of Douala

includes the spoliation of local and riparian communities' rights, the marginalization of customary and ancestral uses (usufruct right) of these communities in their surrounding forest landscapes and various restrictions as far as their access to agricultural lands in forest areas is concerned. Some vulnerable community groups like the indigenous peoples (Pygmies), whose daily cultural and cultic practices' survival entirely almost depends on primary forests, are disorientated by the overexploitation of these lands (Cerutti et al., 2014; Tsanga et al. 2014, Kalonga et al., 2017). This context of increasing environmental and social impacts linked to the exploitation of natural resources in tropical countries, the globalization of these issues and the intensification of ecological citizens' concerns gave rise to various private certification schemes or voluntary sustainability's standards (Seyller et al., 2016). Due to the increasing market awareness of environmental conservation issues, any company is now required to demonstrate a credible integration level of its activities into an environmental and social sustainable approach. The major challenge is to ensure a good trust level between producers and customers and to secure new outlets in niche markets (Pappila, 2013). The market integrates clientelistic logics. They are primarily the driving forces behind the low corporate commitment to forest certification. Clientelism, according to its varied forms (outrageous, moderate and low), determines this fact. As a result, market variable is not retained in this research as a pre-eminent variable.

Data collection and Analysis

To fully understand our research question and ensure its internal validity, data collection was done through a data production mode based on three sources. We were inspired by a triangulation approach of empirical information sources already used in a study prior to this one, and which was based on a similar subject and experimented on the same investigation field (Wandji and Ndoumbe Beroock 2018; Ndoumbe Beroock et al. 2016). One of the major contributions of this triangulation technique was to limit the inherent biases in selecting interviewees and reduce the subjective dimension of some actors' viewpoints whose remarks were often much broader than the substance of the facts sought by the researcher's questions.

Our first data source was represented by field observations made from March to September 2015 by the author within the framework of his doctoral research. Concretely speaking, he participated in four forums on forest governance in Africa, had long stays of at least one month in each of the logging companies studied. He was also engaged in many interviews with experts and managers in charge of logging issues in both firms and central services of the Ministry of Forests in Yaounde, as well as in the regional headquarters of these companies (East, Littoral, South and Southwest). Indeed, these observations revealed a degree

of corporate commitment to social values and forest certification's principles. We also observed that economic arguments (often put forward as an incentive for companies to get involved in certification) were equally mobilized to justify the logging companies' low percentage as far as forest certification process in Cameroon is concerned¹³ (Table 3). In some firms, certification could, on the contrary, hinder the prosperity of their business, especially in a context where forest administration, being their main interlocutor and local partner, does not offer any incentive for their commitment to this process.

The second source of empirical data collection was essentially documentary. It was a set of reports from both forest certification schemes and companies, forest certification procedure manuals, political documents or social and environmental charters, public and private collective agreements in the Cameroonian logging sector, principles' matrices, criteria and indicators of forest certification adapted to the Cameroonian context in general, and the FSC certification scheme in particular.

Finally, our third data source, which we call here the primary source, was from semi-structured interviews conducted in a "face to face" mode with certification managers or authorities of the studied companies. The interview guide set up for this purpose particularly took into account the firm's activities, its motivations for or against its commitment to certification, managers' perception with regard to the compliance with regulations in the logging sector, the relationship between certification schemes, logging companies as well as local and neighboring communities. For confidentiality sake, all interviewees refused audio recordings of their comments. Consequently, their data recording was essentially done in writing to be eventually re-read for validation (without any risk of censure) by actors to whom this duty was assigned. The overall time spent on field interviews was 08 hours and 30 minutes, with an average time of 50 minutes per interview. Depending on the availability constraints of

¹³ Table four

some actors, interviews sometimes took place in two or three phases with those who constantly travel (missions, leaf, etc.).

Table 4: Characteristics of logging companies in the studied samples

	Alpha (model)	Beta (Intermediate case)	Omega (Negative case)
Creation date	1975	1995	1923
Status	Local SME	Subsidiary	Subsidiary
Activities¹⁴	1+3	2+3	1+2+3
Capital Origin and corporate culture	Cameroonian	Italian	French
Number of Employees	609	1,600	1,078
Certification Status	Hostile to certification	In the process	Certified
Harvested area (in hectare)	300,000	431,177	624,000
2013 Turnover (in billion CFA Francs)	11	45.5	23.4
2014 Turnover (in billion CFA Francs)	12	45	24.7
2015 Turnover (in billion CFA Francs)	Not available	Not available	25
Interviewees	General Manager, Administrative and Financial Manager, Chief Operating Officer	Operations and transformation Manager site 2, HR Managers, QHSE Manager	General Manager, Certification Manager, HR Manager
Interview time	2h45	2h30	3h45

Source: From author, based on field data

After defining the methodological framework for this research, the studied firms' mapping will be presented.

¹⁴ Figures 1 + 2 + 3 indicate that the company carries out three activities: operation, processing and certification. 1 + 3 means it deals with exploitation and marketing and 2 + 3 indicates that it is specialized in processing and trading.

The Firms' Mapping

Three firms were chosen as investigation fields for this research: Alpha (model), Beta (intermediate case) and Omega (negative case).

The Model

Our research “model” is based on Alpha Company. It refers to a one-person Small and Medium size Enterprise created in 1995 and headquartered in the Cameroonian Eastern forest region. It operates in 04 logging concessions with a total area of about 300,000 hectares. Its main activities are logging, processing and trading. It has four operating and two processing sites. It is one among the few firms in the Cameroonian logging sector very advanced in finalized wood processing, at a rate of 25% of its activity. Alpha employs 279 people including 4 women (01 senior and 03 middle staffs), 11 senior managers and 19 assistant managers. It had a turnover of 11 and 12 billion CFA Francs in 2013 and 2014 respectively.

The firm exploits more than thirty species of which the most traded are: *Khayaivorensis* A. Chev., *Entandrophragma utile*, *Mansonia Altissima*, *Guarea cedrata*, *Baillonella toxisperma* Pierre, *Terminalia ivorensis* Engl. & Diels, *Aucoumea klaineana* Pierre, *Entandrophragma cylindricum*, *Milicia excelsa* (Welw.) C. C. Berg. It has a very efficient high-tech operating equipment quite scarce in the Cameroonian¹⁵ logging sector. Notwithstanding these strengths, the company does not have access to the global timber market. Its production is based on customers' orders from a competing firm with whom it has signed an exclusive contract.

Hostile to certification, its chief executive considers forest labels as "a source of unnecessary expenses". He also denounces the "lack of objectivity" and the "clientelistic behaviour" of Cameroon-based certification schemes. In an interview with its manager, he made the following declaration: *"We are not a certified company and we do not intend to be. We have found that it is a source of unnecessary expenses, it is not serious"*. During our interview, the administrative and financial manager confirmed they do not have a budget allocated to certification issues or social and environmental responsibilities: *"We do not have a budget allocated for social actions; the General Manager takes actions on the spot. However, I know we spend a lot on social issues. For instance, at the end of each year, we give food to villagers living near our FMUs"*¹⁶.

¹⁵During an interview with the certification and sustainable development Manager of a competing firm in March 2015, the latter told us that the level and equipment quality of their competitor (the Beta firm) is exceptionally scarce in the Cameroonian logging sector. Some competing multinational logging companies also source second-hand equipment from Beta.

¹⁶Forest Management Units

In the same vein, he views as a masquerade how forest certification is practiced in Cameroon: "*It's a masquerade, a commercial activity for certification schemes who do not want to lose their customers. All those therein engaged are in trouble*". The chief executive of this company is, however, in favour of other initiatives like programmes implemented by the European Union to encourage the sustainable exploitation of forest resources in the Congo Basin: "*We are in favour of the VPA / FLEG¹⁷ project because we know it's handled by institutions (European Union and countries), so it's serious*"¹⁸.

In light with the above, we note that forest certification's very high cost and certification schemes' outrageous clientelism explain why corporate managers reject this process. To test this model, it is important to stress on an intermediate case.

The Intermediate case

The Beta firm is a subsidiary of the Italian multinational established in Cameroon since 1975. It aims at exploiting, transforming, exporting and trading logs and wood towards Asian (more than 80 % of logs and 50 to 60% of processed wood) and European (30 to 40% of processed wood)¹⁹ markets. Less than 5% are exported to North American markets. The African continent accounts for about 8% of Beta's processed wood (plywood) exports. It had a turnover of about 45 billion CFA Francs in 2014²⁰ and a workforce of 1,600 employees including 36 women.

In 2014, it operated in five logging concessions with a total area of 316,827 hectares, and had two saw timber processing plants based in the port city of Douala (Headquarters) and in the Cameroonian Eastern region (its logging sites' base). Beta is market leader in wood processing (plywood cutting) in the Congo Basin. It trades more than twenty species (wood varieties) among which the most requested on the market are: *Entandrophragma cylindricum*, *Khaya ivorensis*, *Mansonia Altissima*, *Nauclea trillesii*, *Terminalia ivorensis* Engl. & Diels, *Milicia excelsa* (Welw.) C. C. Berg, *Entandrophragma utile*, *Aucoumea klaineana* Pierre, *Millettia Laurentii*. Since 2009, Beta is involved in a forest certification process supervised by the VERITAS certification office called the Legal Origin of Wood (LOW) and the General Supervisory Company (GSC) for its custody chain. Despite the completion of these preliminary

¹⁷The FLEGT (Forest Law Enforcement, Governance and Trade) programme is an initiative of the European Union since 1998. It aims at promoting a better traceability of the legal origin of tropical timber destined to European markets.

¹⁸Interview with the founder and CEO of the company in June 2015.

¹⁹Statistics on timber exports from the forest department of the Port Authority of Douala (2015).

²⁰Interview with Beta's Financial Manager in 2015.

steps to an FSC certification, Beta still hesitates to make a firm commitment as far as this process is concerned. In terms of work organization for instance, only its senior staffs have full health insurance²¹. Other workers benefit from a local social security scheme, the National Fund of Social Providence which in fact only guarantees an approximate level of pensions' coverage. In the Beta's top management, discourse on maintaining and consolidating competitiveness seems more focused on *business-as-usual* than on developing new certification sectors as emphasized by the Quality, Hygiene, Security and Environment (QHSE) Manager:

"As assets, we have good industrial tools (well equipped) and partnerships or competitors who provide us with raw materials. In addition, we have competent human resources (know-how) able to provide markets²² with products without competition".

Referring to the interview with the Beta's human resources manager, commitment to forest certification or CSR programme has a moderate cost because of the expected cost-benefit advantages: *"Forest certification or CSR is expensive indeed. However, when we evaluate the benefits behind this commitment, we see that it is worth to get involved in, despite some corrupt practices spotting certification schemes' objectivity"*. Indeed, the moderate certification cost associated with some corruption's forms or moderate clientelism (Medard, 2000) explains the intermediate position of this firm: the latter being in the certification process.

Tackling an intermediate case leads us to avoid reifying the model, that is, to exaggerate on some properties. However, it is saturated only if we resort to a negative case.

The Negative case

The negative case is represented by a subsidiary of a French multinational established in Africa since 1923, that is, since the pre-colonial period. Its main activities are logging, wood processing, log export and sawn timber marketing in nearly 50 countries. It operates in four countries in the Congo Basin namely Cameroon, the Republic of Congo, Gabon and, most recently, the Central African Republic. It works in collaboration with its logging partners in a total area of 624,000 hectares of forest for a total production of about 220, 00 m³ of logs per year. It employs more than 1,000 people. It has two large logging and timber production sites in Cameroon, one located in the Southern Region and the other in the East. Among its most exploited timber varieties, the most traded are: *Entandrophragmacylindricum* and *Khayaivorensis* A. Chev. These two species account for over 70% of the volume of timber exported as sawn wood. The other major species exploited are: *Miliciaexcelsa*,

²¹This situation is relatively usual in most Cameroon-based logging companies.

²²Interview with Beta's site 2 Manager in May 2015.

Baillonellatoxisperma Pierre, *Aucoumea klaineana* Pierre and *Pitadenia Africana*, most exported in the form of logs. It is also engaged in FSC certification since 2010. Although the company recognizes some disadvantages and weaknesses of this label (high cost for instance), their Manager considers its virtues many for their firm:

“You need to be financially heavy to engage in the certification process. Nevertheless, we do not imagine for a single while withdrawing from it, for it is somehow a lever for implementing Corporate Social Responsibility”.

Indeed, certification is seen as a strategic tool which allows this firm to be more credible to its multiple stakeholders, including business partners: *“It's a very important tool for us. It's what allowed us to face the last financial crisis in the market. It is essential to a company which wants to prosper. Its benefits are many. It made us win very new promoting markets. It is necessary. Whatever the production level, we are sure to sell our products; it is also what pushed us to acquire a new forest in the Central African Republic because of the high demand”*²³. Moreover, the high certification cost does not hinder corporate commitment. Its managers denounce clientelistic practices which are nevertheless not strong enough to limit their engagement to this process.

Using the negative case allowed qualifying or supplementing the idea of the weak corporate commitment with regard to forest certification. This leads to relevant results as well as new research perspectives.

Findings and Research Prospects

Following investigations carried out by Hassine and Ghazzi-Nékhili (2013), Fouilleux (2013), Kusonyola Kalonga et al., (2016), we came up with the following outcomes:

The long-term certification high cost is an important and recurrent parameter in interviewees' speeches. This variable supports logging companies' low engagement to forest certification in Cameroon. One would have thought that a high certification cost would be deterrent. On the contrary, certification offers some advantages, particularly in terms of reputation, image, search for new business partners and financial profitability (Bon and Pensel, 2015).

If the analysis of the data collected from the studied cases shows that they unanimously share the idea of the high certification cost, their very low engagement to this process is still to

²³Interview with the Omega's certification Manager in July 2015.

be explained: what could leads a company to engage in certification while its cost is deemed high? The high certification cost works with other variables to be clarified.

The identified clientelism in the relationship between certification schemes and these firms plays an important role in their decision to engage in this process. The more it is deemed exaggerated (outrageous), the less they get therein involved. Among clientelistic levels (outrageous, moderate and low), the outrageous one seems to limit their commitment to this process. Moderate clientelism also influences their decision to fully engage in short-term certification.

As far as the turnover is concerned, it varies from one firm to another. The certification-hostile one had a low turnover of 22 million US dollars in 2013. In 2014, there was a slight increase up to 24 million US dollars. The upward trend in sales did not change this firm's negative perception with regard to certification. The one in the certification process had a high turnover of 91 million US dollars in 2013; this figure slightly decreased to 90 million US dollars in 2014. However, the downward trend in sales did not affect its commitment to forest certification. For the certified company, the turnover was 46.8 million US dollars in 2013, relatively high compared to the previous year (2014), that is, 49.4 million dollars.

In view of the foregoing analyzes, we note that the certification-hostile firm's low turnover seems to play a dissuasive role in its commitment to forest certification. In addition, the observation shows that the company in the certification process and the certified one are all of foreign origin (multinationals). Their high sales' rate is probably due to the easy and privileged access to international markets. On the other hand, the certification-hostile firm's low turnover seems to be supported by that it does not have access to the world timber market, and consequently sells most of its production on the spot to multinationals with whom it has signed exclusive contracts.

Table 5: Summary of Results

Case		Certification-hostile firm (Model)	Firm in the certification process (Intermediate case)	Certified firm (Negative case)
Variables				
Long-term certification cost	Very high cost	Yes	Yes	Yes
	Average cost	No	No	No
	Low cost	No	No	No
Certification schemes' Clientelism	Outrageous clientelism	Yes	No	No
	Moderate clientelism	No	Yes	No
	Low Clientelism	No	No	Yes
Turnover	High turnover	No	Yes	No
	Average turnover	No	No	Yes
	Low turnover	Yes	No	No
Corporate Origin	National origin	Yes	No	No
	Foreign origin	No	Yes	Yes

Source : Adapted from Ragin (1987)

In line with these findings, it is important to consider prospects for successful research. For this purpose, three analytical axes are taken into account.

Firstly, the slight engagement to forest certification enables to grasp a kind of ambiguity: the high certification cost coupled with outrageous clientelism is likely to explain such a weak corporate commitment. However, in other frameworks, this commitment is remarkable despite the above-mentioned hindrances. To this end, Smouts (2001) notes that in an institutionalized context, FSC certification leads to the implementation of standards, the control of evaluators, the awarding of a label as well as consequent funding. Therefore, the low turnover is not a dissuasive effect in getting involved in certification. The institutional variable probably plays a prominent role in this context, except that our study's framework does not have the same characteristics.

Secondly, the low corporate commitment to forest certification can also be explained by its discredit. The weak observable certification level in Africa compared to the West (Thorner, Plouvier and Bass (2000) can thus find a relevant explanation. In fact, in 1996, Central Africa recorded a first experience of forest certification, precisely in Gabon. Leroy Gabon was the first company to obtain the FSC certification. But after being evaluated by the General Supervisor Company (GSC), this certificate was withdrawn one year later. Alert or activist movements made use of this outcome to denounce the clientelistic practices in the logging sector, particularly in issuing these certifications (Kouna Eloundou, 2006, Gafo Gómez-Zamalloa, 2011). When we try to identify variables supporting the low corporate commitment to forest certification, forest certification's high cost effects and excessive clientelism matter less. Given these considerations, the results of our research contrast with those of Kouna Eloundou (2008) and Thorner, Plouvier and Bass (2000), since they much more consider the induced effects of this low commitment and not its process.

Thirdly, contrary to the results of Kouna Eloundou (2006) which implicitly reveal this low commitment to certification, neither the certification cost nor certification schemes' clientelism are preminent variables. Account must be taken of the corporate perceived level with regard to these variables. As a result, the "high cost" variable correlated with the "outrageous clientelism" variable provides some explanation for the low corporate commitment to certification. Turnover and corporate origin enable to complete this explanation mode. It is therefore appropriate to include in this analysis, some variables which were initially absent in the data collection phase, and in similar works on the low corporate commitment to the forest certification issue.

Conclusion

This study shows how companies in the forest industry sector in Cameroon are aware of the importance and challenges of forest certification and by extension the responsible and sustainable management of forest resources. Certification is hardly necessary to carry out actions in favor of environmental and social sustainability. This could explain the logging companies' low commitment to this process in Central Africa, particularly in Cameroon. However, Cameroon's poorly institutionalized context gives rise to four variables: the high certification cost, outrageous clientelism, low turnover, and social capital origin. Such research may be in contrast with other works. Our findings can be observable in other contexts leading to complementary investigations on the issue.

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Appendix

Box 1: Process to obtain an FSC certification in Central Africa

- a- Accreditation of independent certifiers of sustainable forest management in accordance with principles and criteria published by the FSC;
- b- Verification of the sustainability of forest management by accredited certifiers;
- c) Certificates award for sustainable management and timber traceability for a five-years period;
- d- Control of accredited certifiers;
- e- Audits of the FSC certificate holders' continued compliance with sustainable principles and criteria.