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2. Junior lawyers for grassroots advocacy in Cameroon

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2.1 Introduction

Over the past ten years, Cameroon has witnessed a surge in investments for agribusiness, mining, forestry and infrastructure. While these projects could improve Cameroonians' standards of living, large-scale land allocation has had adverse effects on rural people. Under relevant legislation, these people only have weak rights and mechanisms to protect the lands they live and depend on.

Courts are geographically, technically and culturally estranged from rural communities. Where people have brought investment-related cases to court, they have rarely, if ever, succeeded. Rural people also have little say in land allocation processes, which has fostered conflict around large-scale investments. Some conflicts have led to tensions, intimidation, repression and imprisonment.

People often lack: awareness of their existing rights, information about proposed investments, and the capacity to hold authorities to account. Non-governmental organisations (NGOs) support communities but face their own challenges. Local NGOs may have limited technical capacity, while national NGOs with specialist expertise are based in big cities (mainly in Yaoundé and Douala) and are hampered by the long distances and high costs involved in working with communities.

The Junior Lawyers Initiative (JLI) links national NGOs that have technical and advocacy capacity with local NGOs whose strong knowledge of the local context can support communities in their quest for social justice in investment processes. Spearheaded by CED, the initiative mobilises new law graduates to support people confronted with natural resource investments. While the first two generations of junior lawyers primarily addressed issues linked to the forestry sector, the third and current generation (October 2015 to December 2017) expanded to all natural resource management sub-sectors.

2.2 The approach

The JLI involves selecting, training, supporting and seconding new law graduates – the junior lawyers – to the field to assist local NGOs and rural communities in three areas: training and awareness raising; specialist support in connection with concrete cases; and advocacy at both local and national levels.

The JLI also aims to create a new generation of Cameroonian lawyers who are sensitive to community rights. Today's junior lawyers will be tomorrow's experts, and the lessons they learn will echo across their careers, whatever path they

follow. The JLI involves three main phases: selection and training, deployment, and ongoing monitoring and support.

The junior lawyers are selected through a highly competitive process. Candidates are chosen based on their legal knowledge and other criteria including field experience, eagerness to learn, motivation to support communities, and likely resilience in the face of difficult conditions away from home.

The final selection of the 10 junior lawyers was made from a shortlist of 25 candidates (who themselves were chosen among 250 initial applicants) that completed a two-month training. The training covered topics not included in university curricula yet central to rural people's lives: investments in natural resources, legal issues relevant to everyday life in rural areas, data collection and advocacy techniques, and access to justice strategies. The training is interactive and iterative: while the curriculum is defined in advance, it can be adapted during the training, upon specific requests by the trainees and NGOs.

At the end of the training, the 10 junior lawyers selected (six women and four men) were assigned to work with six local NGOs, and with CED (to assist in coordinating the others). As a result, the project currently operates in six sites reflecting diverse ecological and socio-economic features. Deployment is based on four principles:

- **Working with local NGOs.** The NGOs are the junior lawyers' main point of contact for two reasons. Firstly, these organisations are already working with the communities and have a good understanding of the local context. They can therefore help the junior lawyers fit in. Secondly, when the junior lawyer leaves, the local NGOs remain on the ground, ensuring continuity of the intervention. The NGOs apply to participate in the scheme (six out of 15 NGO applications were selected in the latest round) and must commit to providing the logistical and technical support the junior lawyer will need.
- **Rotation.** Each junior lawyer's secondment with one NGO typically lasts from six to nine months. After this, the junior lawyers move to another NGO, for a total duration not exceeding two years. The aim is to expose the junior lawyers to diverse realities, and to enable local NGOs to benefit from different skills and areas of expertise.
- **Diversity of topics and assignments.** The work of the junior lawyers responds to local demand, and is jointly supervised by CED and the host NGO. The junior lawyers provide support to their host organisation. Collaborating closely with the host organisation and CED, the junior lawyers also work with rural people to identify problems and possible solutions, and to implement the solutions identified. This may involve informing the community about the law and the options available; facilitating dialogue within the community; writing letters to administrative authorities; helping the community map its land and resources; and facilitating access to justice, including by defending cases in courts.

- **Effective communication** between the junior lawyer, the host organisation and CED, on issues ranging from the junior lawyer's overall schedule and the priority themes for work in the field, to advocacy activities and communication with authorities.

Monitoring is based on regular communication between the junior lawyer, the host NGO and CED; monthly timesheets are completed by junior lawyers and reviewed by CED; and periodic meetings bringing together the junior lawyers to facilitate dialogue, lesson sharing and collective reflection.

2.3 Outcomes and lessons learned

The latest cohort of junior lawyers has achieved important results and encountered a few challenges. Positive outcomes include:

- **Helping communities speak out.** The junior lawyers have helped amplify community voices. In the North West region, for example, the junior lawyers organised meetings between communities and authorities, who then made firm commitments to address some of the communities' issues. In Niété, Figuil and Bipindi, the junior lawyers facilitated multi-stakeholder dialogue platforms that gave communities a seat at the table and enabled them to raise issues that matter to them. In the case of one large agribusiness project, the junior lawyers helped draw international attention to community concerns by collecting data; communicating (via CED) with international NGOs; and facilitating communication between international advocates and community leaders on the ground.
- **Facilitating access to justice.** Junior lawyers have worked with local and national NGOs, lawyers and experts to defend communities in court cases. In Yokadouma, the junior lawyers appeared in court and obtained the release of an indigenous person from prolonged custody. Though this case was not directly related to agribusiness investment issues, the junior lawyer's intervention supported the host organisation's work in support of indigenous people. In Kumba, the junior lawyer prevented the imprisonment of an environmental rights defender, by facilitating collaboration with the defender's lawyer and international NGOs.
- **Strengthening local organisations.** In response to requests by communities and local NGOs, all the junior lawyers have developed training materials, in collaboration with CED. These materials can be used for future training in communities. One host organisation in the East region also received support with their administrative procedures.

The junior lawyers have also faced challenges. The first relates to the sensitivity and complexity of the issues tackled. The involvement of local elites in agribusiness investments creates particular challenges, because these people can mobilise the machinery of government to protect their interests. In one case, a government

official asked the junior lawyer to leave the administrative jurisdiction within 24 hours, after the lawyer attempted to collect data on a sensitive issue. In these more difficult situations, CED and the host organisation step in to front the action, with the junior lawyer playing a less visible role. Security procedures have also been put in place to regularly assess and address risks affecting the junior lawyers' work.

The second challenge is practical and relates to logistics and communication. The junior lawyers operate in remote areas, and often have difficulties communicating with CED, travelling between villages and meeting with public officials. As discussed, a firm commitment on the part of the host organisation to provide the logistical support needed is a key element of the scheme.

Much depends on the opportunities and constraints that the applicable law creates in protecting community rights. But operationally, the JLI approach does present advantages: it is cheaper than involving professional lawyers, who may also resist spending extensive periods of time with communities; at the same time, the approach provides more sophisticated expertise than would be possible under conventional paralegal programmes. The institutional arrangement with local NGOs can help sustain interventions beyond project duration, while the national NGO, CED, is able to provide specialist expertise to support the junior lawyers and operational capability to escalate advocacy to the national and international levels.

The relationship between CED and the host NGO can also pave the way for more collaboration between these organisations and their partners. In the longer term, the emergence of a new generation of lawyers more sensitive to the rights and aspirations of rural communities can help shift prevailing patterns in the law and how it is applied, particularly as these lawyers will go on to take up positions as government officials, NGO or private sector practitioners, experts or researchers.

2.4 Reflections

The junior lawyers approach presents strong potential for upscaling. While this will inevitably require tailoring the approach to different local contexts, key principles include:

- **Effective supervision and coordination.** The junior lawyers have limited experience, and they need support. This support can be modulated over time, with the initial phase typically requiring closer handholding. We estimate that one full time senior person is needed to supervise eight junior lawyers. Effective supervision is necessary to ensure quality in the intervention, while coordination is essential in ensuring relevance, efficiency and good communication between the junior lawyer, the national organisation and the host NGO.
- **Effective diagnostics of issues and appropriate responses.** Identifying the issues requires analysis by the junior lawyers but also joint strategising by the national organisation and the host NGO. Developing response strategies requires assessing complexity in light of the lawyers' capabilities. Some issues

are technically challenging, but the junior lawyer may have skills they can bring to bear. Defining who is best placed to play what role helps ensure quality and manage risks.

- **Attitude is essential.** Technical expertise matters but is not enough. The junior lawyers need a strong enough personality to avoid falling into the role of *intern* that does not play a significant part within the host organisation. They must also be eager to learn, listen and reconsider their theoretical knowledge in light of the experiences they encounter. A humble attitude is key when interacting with communities.
- **Focus on institutional set-ups.** The junior lawyers are the main protagonists of the action. But it is the tripartite collaboration between each junior lawyer, the national organisation and the host NGO that ultimately determines potential for impact, scaling and sustainability. Trust, clarity of roles and good communication are needed throughout for this tripartite collaboration to work.
- **Take an iterative process.** Maximising effectiveness requires ensuring at each step that the intervention adds value to ongoing initiatives, and tailoring activities to evolving, context-specific factors such as diverse interlocutors (e.g. local administration, traditional authorities, central government) and changing political space.
- **Assessing and managing risks.** Where political space is constrained or shrinking, strategies to assess and manage risks are particularly important to ensure both effectiveness of interventions and safety of the junior lawyers, the communities, the host NGO and all actors involved.
- **Facilitate sharing among junior lawyers.** At times, being a junior lawyer can be an isolating experience, particularly where the lawyers operate in remote areas with few other legal minds to exchange with. Yet the junior lawyers often confront similar challenges, and have much to learn from one another. Ongoing lesson-sharing through periodic meetings among junior lawyers can make a difference to both confidence and expertise.