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"Disempowering Democracy: Local Representation in Community and Carbon Forestry in Africa"

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All major agencies intervening in community-based and carbon forestry – such as international development agencies, conservation institutions, and national governments – state that their interventions must engage local participation in decision making. All say they aim to represent local people in the design and implementation of their interventions. In practice, decision-making processes are rarely "free," barely "prior," poorly "informative" and seldom seek any form of democratic "consent" or even "consultation." Through case studies of representation processes in forestry programs in the Congo Basin region, Ghana, Kenya, Nigeria, Senegal and Uganda, this special issue shows how forestry interventions weaken local democracy. We show that participatory and '"free, prior and informed consent" processes rarely reflect local needs and aspirations, they are rarely democratic and they do not permit participants to make significant decisions – such as whether or how the project will take place. The intervening agents' choices of local partners are based on expedience, naïve notions of who can speak for local people, anti-government and pro-market ideologies informed by a comfort with expert rule. Although elected local governments are present in all cases in this special issue, they are systematically circumvented. Instead, project committees, non-governmental organizations, customary authorities, and local forestry department offices are recognized as "representatives" while technical project objectives are favored over democratic representation. (Text from authors' abstract)

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