

Inclusive forest management in the Congo Basin: The role of community forestry in improving forest and climate governance

Reflections from civil society in the Congo Basin

“Community forests have the potential to improve the living conditions of rural populations and to support activities to protect and sustainably manage natural resources, including trees.”

Introduction

At the 17th annual Meeting of Parties of the Congo Basin Forest Partnership (CBFP) in Douala, Cameroon, Fern and members of the African Community Rights Network (ACRN) organised a side event on inclusive forest management in the Congo Basin. The event offered the chance to reflect on the **role of community forestry in improving forest and climate governance, based on experiences in the sub-region.**

The meeting's overall objective was to improve understanding of the relationship between community forestry and forest and climate governance, by considering the areas dedicated to community forestry as places with the potential both to strengthen forest governance from a 'landscape' perspective and to protect the rights of local and indigenous communities.

Around 50 participants accepted Fern's invitation and took part in valuable discussions. These were led by Adonis Milol from GREEN DESK Consulting and organised around the reports presented by Climate Analytics and partners from the CoNGOs project – the Centre for Environment and Development (*Centre pour l'Environnement et le Développement, CED*), Cameroon; the Forum for Governance and Human Rights (*Forum pour la Gouvernance et les Droits de l'Homme, FGDH*), Congo; and the Centre for Environmental Information and Sustainable Development (*Centre pour l'Information Environnementale et le Développement Durable, CIEDD*), Central African Republic. The United States Agency for International Development (USAID) was given the floor to highlight the challenges related to implementing community forestry.

Current situation

A clear legal framework, incorporating the rights of local and indigenous communities to land and resources, is essential to good forest management, efforts to tackle climate change and the survival of local communities. For more than a decade, allowing local and indigenous communities in the Congo Basin to manage forests has been considered to have the potential to restore forests, conserve biodiversity, combat illegal logging, address climate change and secure sustainable livelihoods for local and indigenous communities.

However, community forestry is struggling to become a reality in most countries in the sub-region, despite clear commitments and noteworthy advances, especially in the context of implementing the Voluntary Partnership Agreements (VPAs) from the Forest Law Enforcement, Governance and Trade (FLEGT) Action Plan with the European Union (EU).

In **Cameroon**, forestry legislation has included provisions on community forestry for more than 20 years. However, despite high hopes, this is widely considered unaccomplished. Only 1.18 per cent of Cameroon's land is under a community forestry regime and the community forests that do exist have not achieved the expected results. To increase the likelihood of community forests helping to tackle climate change, Cameroon should build communities' capacity to get involved, to tackle corruption and to overcome bureaucracy.

The forests in the **Central African Republic (CAR)** are home to a large number of local and indigenous

communities. In the forested region of the south-west, the local and indigenous communities coexist with forestry companies alongside the Mbaéré-Bodingué National Park. Central African civil society has undertaken to promote the rights of these communities to access, monitor and manage forest resources, particularly through the VPA process, as well as committing to adhere to supportive legislation, namely the decree on community forestry to support communities in implementing this type of forest management. Involving local and indigenous communities in managing the natural resources upon which they heavily depend can be an effective way to help reduce poverty and support sustainable environmental management in a country that is trying to recover following a serious civil war.

The **Republic of the Congo** (Congo) is committed to improving forestry resource management, particularly by tackling illegal logging and involving local and indigenous communities in making forest exploitation an asset, both in terms of sustainable development and improving the populations' living conditions. Both forest policy and the VPA specifically promote community forestry development, although the legislative provisions for its implementation still need to be defined. Civil society is working to ensure that the new forestry law supports the local and indigenous communities in managing community forest areas, and that breaches of law and any violation of their rights, which hinder their effective participation, are addressed. It is also calling for more areas in which community forests could be created.

Governments in all of these countries should implement their commitments to improved forest and climate governance in order to enable communities, and future generations, to sustainably manage the forests on which they depend. The sub-region's policymakers and the donor countries that support them must be fully invested in achieving the national climate objectives set out in the Nationally Determined Contributions (NDCs), which have been produced within the framework of the Paris Agreement on climate change.

Why should community forestry be promoted in the Congo Basin?

Introducing the panelists' reports, Fern briefly recalled the objectives of the CoNGOs project, which primarily seeks to improve forest governance to ensure equitable and sustainable livelihoods within the community forestry sector in the Congo Basin.

In his report, 'Analysis of the relationship between forest governance and deforestation in Cameroon', **Michel Bruce from Climate Analytics** presented the results on the correlation between the two, using the main indicators of forest governance: transparency, coordination and accountability. These indicators were compiled using a general framework developed by Kemitraan (Partnership for Governance Reform, Indonesia) in 2009 to analyse forest governance. This study showed that forest and land governance

undertaken by state actors and civil society organisations is far from meeting the principles of good governance that are essential to fulfilling the Intended Nationally Determined Contributions (INDCs) – these became NDCs following the ratification of the Paris Agreement, which identified the measures required to meet the global climate objectives. It so happens that land and forest governance in general is not very transparent or participatory due to the lack of commitment to coordinating activities. The study recommended involving local and indigenous communities more in decision-making regarding forest management, better horizontal and vertical coordination among the various actors, and also better strategic planning of activities.

Aurèle Ayemele from CED reflected on 'Inclusive forest management in Cameroon: The role of community forestry in improving forest and climate governance'. He presented the activities of a project under way in the villages of Nomedjoh in the east and Nkolenyeng in the south of Cameroon – two communities that have community forests.



Photo: Cameroon, Indra Van Gisbergen

The report fed back on revising simple plans for community forest management in these villages. The major innovation is a participatory revision process that places communities at the centre of all revision activities, after they have undergone technical and operational capacity building.

The project is still under way, but is already showing encouraging results in the choice of priority uses of forests, in terms of their impacts in combating climate change. The report also provided an assessment of income-generating activities other than wood sales. It showed good economic results and options for improving such revenue that were being developed, notably domesticating Raffia Palm weevil larvae, a local delicacy.

Maixent Agnimbat from FGDH presented an external observation exercise from Congo with the potential to make community forestry a tool for strengthening forest governance. As it is more specific and less restricted



Photo: Central African Republic, Davis Lewis

than the mandatory independent observation, external observation supplements the latter's efforts. Citizens can get involved as it is open to everyone, not just experts. It leads to effective advocacy and particularly respect for community rights in forest areas. As such, it is an instrument that can help foster an environment that is better suited to implementing community forestry.

Jean Jacques Mathamale from CIEDD presented the efforts that his country, CAR, is making; these have been inspired by experiences in neighbouring countries, with a view to introducing successful community forestry adapted to the CAR context. National legislation already enables community forests to be created and civil society has thus identified pilot sites in the forested region in south-western CAR.

In his report on 'Community forestry, lessons learned: Devolution of power or improvement of community living conditions?', **Nicodème Tchamou from USAID** presented the lessons learned on community forestry, based on experiences in Cameroon. He explained that despite its noble objectives – improved forest management; strengthening local populations' access and management rights to improve their living conditions; improved governance and decision-making in the forestry sector; improved skills, capacity and social capital – community forestry has opened the door to abuse by the elite and private sector operators, namely dispossession and expropriation of communities. He presented a typology of community forests based on their developers. In his eyes, everyone has profited from community forests — everyone except local communities.

Towards a new paradigm for community forestry in the Congo Basin?

Overall, the participants unanimously agreed that community forests have the potential to improve the

living conditions of rural populations and to support activities to protect and sustainably manage natural resources, including trees. As a viable concept in itself, there is every reason to institute this.

Most countries in the Congo Basin have not yet established their own community forests. We cannot, therefore, generalise about the difficulties observed in Cameroon and identify them as universal shortcomings of community forests.

When assessing the "failure" of community forests in Cameroon, many "causes" are in fact "consequences". The causes were, in reality, to be found in the institutional and structural provisions that had been made when devising the community forest regime in Cameroon. Most had not been adapted to the context, needs and capacities of local and indigenous communities.

Corruption, embezzlement and other forms of misappropriation observed in community forest management are consequences of weak governance.

Community forests should be understood as areas that facilitate a range of socio-economic and ecological activities, which, when considered together, constitute 'community forestry'.

The concept of participatory management includes community forestry, but should not be limited to this. This distinction is necessary in order to avoid an interpretation that is too focused on silviculture in community forestry, where the commercialisation of wood becomes the primary focus. Conclusive evidence has established that forest resources other than wood are more profitable by far and have a very high rate of resilience. They are therefore more suited to sustainable use, without affecting the timber potential and forest cover, which are necessary in order to achieve the carbon-capture objectives in the REDD+ projects.

This makes community forestry a credible sustainable management tool, which can simultaneously improve populations' living conditions and help tackle global warming. There are nonetheless prerequisites, which are to be found in formulating flexible conditions for creating and exploiting community forests. For example, in Cameroon, the requirement for a simple management plan to create a community forest is incompatible with the simultaneous requirement for an environmental impact study, as the simple management plan is, by its very nature, a plan to develop and exploit a community forest. Carrying out such a study is beyond the technical and financial capacities of local communities. This is one of the main reasons behind their recourse to external financing and the predatory behaviour of the elite.

Forest governance in general needs to be strengthened. The countries in the Congo Basin sub-region are all involved in the FLEGT process; Cameroon, Congo and CAR have signed VPAs with the EU. These bilateral agreements seek to improve traceability in the trade of forest products intended for the European market. One of the pillars of these agreements is strengthening the sector's legality, understood here as the unwavering adherence to all regulations and procedures relating to the extraction, processing, exploitation and commercialisation of these products.

Possibilities and recommendations

In Cameroon, through the Community and Forest Platform, civil society is working to implement an advocacy action plan to promote community forestry. This plan proposes a review of the legal framework on community forestry to ensure that it considers mechanisms to tackle climate change as a

way of promoting community forestry and securing communities' development needs. It also seeks to analyse the procedures and standards for managing community forests, in order to detect any inadequacies or burdens that would make it difficult for communities to assume the responsibility for managing forests. New legal text, adapted to the realities on the ground, will be prepared and proposed to this end. Civil society also plans to build the technical and operational capacities of communities for managing their forest and to diversify the sources for creating wealth, income-generating activities and micro-enterprises around community forests. This will require a formalised procedure for financing the development plans of communities involved in combating climate change, whose participation in fulfilling the NDCs is essential.

In Congo, the newly adopted forest code, which has undergone several years of revision, will enable community forests to be created and local and indigenous communities and populations to be supported in adopting this new tool effectively. Furthermore, the land development reform under Congo's future REDD+ investment plan¹ and the independent forest observation that forms part of the VPA/FLEGT implementation, are key to ensuring that communities' rights are respected and to helping reinforce their land security.

In CAR, developing a forestry policy is an important step in the process of standardising and improving legislation that will have an impact on community forest development. Moreover, other important initiatives are under way, notably the land reform and the adaptation of the legal framework for VPA/FLEGT implementation,



including the development of a legality grid for community forests and artisanal licences. These revisions and reforms to the legal framework will be important for promoting good forest governance and, in particular, community management of forests, as well as improving the coordination of joint awareness-raising activities, consultation and participation among stakeholders to establish fair and viable community forestry in CAR.

The participants emphasised that the vision and the efforts of civil society warranted support, while they also provided the following **recommendations**:

- **Strengthen forest governance in general, with a particular focus on community forestry.**
 - Strengthen forest governance in community forest management, to reduce the effects of corruption and embezzlement.
 - A system to trace products from community forests should be designed to operate with the support of beneficiaries from these forests and should be adapted to their context.
- **Reform the legal system and introduce administrative decentralisation to strengthen community forestry.**
 - Take administrative measures to incentivise and promote the commercialisation of products from community forests.
 - Develop specific channels for selling products from community forests.
 - Administrative decentralisation should also be applied to community forest management, particularly by introducing a clause favouring products from community forests in public contracts at the decentralized level.
- **Local and indigenous communities should continue receiving capacity building and support in the context of community forestry.**
 - Community forests should be maintained, promoted and developed.
 - The local populations benefiting from community forests should undergo capacity building, with a focus on tackling illegal logging and uncontrolled deforestation.



CoNGOs project: NGOs collaborating for equitable and sustainable community livelihoods in Congo Basin forests, funded by the British government's UK Aid programme and managed by an NGO consortium led by the International Institute for Environment and Development (IIED).

The project's objective is to help improve governance and livelihoods in forest communities in the Congo Basin by developing fair and sustainable community forestry. The project is being implemented in Cameroon, CAR, the Republic of the Congo and the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), and to a certain extent in Gabon.

The CoNGOs consortium members are the IIED, ClientEarth, Fern, the Forest Peoples Programme (FPP), Rainforest Foundation UK (RFUK) and Well Grounded. The consortium/project partners based in Cameroon are Association OKANI, the CED and the African Institute for Economic and Social Development's training programme (Institut Africain pour le Développement Économique et Social - Formation, INADES-Formation). The Network of Indigenous and Local Populations for Sustainable Management of Forest Ecosystems in Central Africa (Réseau des Populations Autochtones et Locales pour la gestion durable des écosystèmes forestiers de Centrefrique, REPALCA) and the CIEDD are based in CAR; The Organisation for Development and Human Rights in Congo (Organisation pour le Développement et les Droits Humains au Congo, ODDHC), the FGDH and the Junior Legal Aid Bureau (Comptoir Juridique Junior, CJJ) are based in the Republic of the Congo and Tropenbos International is the partner in the Democratic Republic of the Congo.



This report was funded by the British government through its UK Aid programme. However, the opinions expressed do not necessarily reflect those of the British government.

“For more than a decade, allowing local and indigenous communities in the Congo Basin to manage forests has been considered to have the potential to restore forests, conserve biodiversity, combat illegal logging, address climate change and secure sustainable livelihoods for local and indigenous communities.”



Rue d'Edimbourg 26,
1050 Brussels
Belgium
www.fern.org

Contact:
marieange@fern.org
Tel: +32 2 894 4695