

Congo Basin Forest Partnership

Thematic workshop on “The role of industrial logging in the sustainable management of Congo Basin forests” (19-20 May 2009, Douala)

- Conclusions –

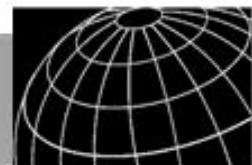
One of the basic objectives of the Congo Basin Forest Partnership as defined in its cooperation framework with COMIFAC is to promote the sustainable management of forests in the sub-region as stated and recognised in the Yaoundé Declaration (1999). Industrial logging is seen by the majority of partners as forming part of the sustainable management of production forest concessions, with forest certification being the tool that can enable consumers and processing companies to distinguish between timber produced under sustainable management conditions and that originating from logging operations managed in a less transparent manner.

With a view to contributing to the public debate on the economic, social and environmental impact of industrial logging – a debate which has brought to light some contradictory stances, to say the least – the CBFP offered to hold a consultation workshop on “The role of industrial logging in the sustainable management of Congo Basin forests” (19-20 May 2009) in Douala, Cameroon, to develop a joint vision of the CBFP partners in the positive and negative consequences of industrial logging on the system for sustainably managing Central African forests.

The German facilitation team invited scientists, local NGOs and representatives from the companies involved in logging to talk about their experiences, in order to establish the impact that sustainable industrial logging would have on the environmental development of the zone in question and on the economic and social development of nearby people, taking account of those who are dependent on the forest. This workshop was also an opportunity to establish the true impact of the global economic crisis, which has had a severe effect on the construction industry in Europe and the United States, on the forestry sector in the countries of Central Africa.

At the end of the debates and constructive exchanges, the CBFP partners reached the following conclusions:

1. The sustainable management of forest production concessions by means of drawing up and enforcing forest management plans is making significant progress in the countries of the Congo Basin, where the number of certified concessions far exceeds that in other tropical forest ecosystems. However, the presentation of figures summarising the number of concessions managed and certified by country and by type of reference system has raised issues concerning the validity and availability of such information. The State of the Forests report is one outcome of the efforts undertaken by the CBFP to increase the availability and standardisation of this data.
2. The forest sector contributes to the economy in these countries, and to the social development of the local population. Logging companies therefore contribute to economic development at a national level by paying taxes and duties, and at a local level by establishing areas of development that stimulate the zones in question, which are often remote and/or landlocked. The various certification systems and current legislation in several countries also stipulate the adherence to terms of reference to guarantee direct improvements to the living conditions and environment of the local people, via direct investments in education, infrastructure and health



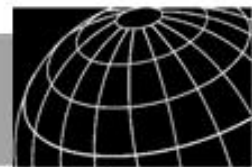
3. The type of forest certification sought by loggers is dependent on how the target markets react to the certificate in question. To boost the credibility of certificates, it would seem necessary to establish a specially tailored regional system of reference. This type of certification would enable consumers to differentiate between “good timber” and “bad timber” irrespective of its origin. Any system of reference that might be used in the future should also include climate-related indicators (greenhouse effect/biomass inventory).

4. Advances in the certification of production forest concessions are particularly important since the criteria for management plans laid down in forest codes appear to be insufficient to fully protect biodiversity. Sustainable management will therefore be a gamble, with biodiversity itself being at stake. Further research into forest ecosystems in the countries of the sub-region is also absolutely vital, in order to review the parameters specified in the forest codes and establish how to implement management plans on a scientific basis. The inventory of vulnerable species currently being undertaken in some zones presents a clear choice between well calculated profit and the uncertain vulnerability of a poorly studied resource. Establishing public-private research partnerships (PPP) and developing management units within companies would be preferred solutions for increasing our knowledge of the resource.

5. A more precise definition of the concept of biodiversity is needed to measure the impact of industrial logging on plant and animal biodiversity. However, current definitions differ in various respects, and include different indicators. The CBFP partners agree that forest ecosystems are constantly changing, and will therefore never contain identical incidences of species. Conservation efforts in zones earmarked for logging should therefore focus on pragmatic attempts to prevent the loss of certain species.

6. Logging zones do not aim to be sanctuaries of biodiversity in the same way that protected areas do, yet poaching and illegal logging seem easier to control there than in conservation zones. Certification and surveillance efforts in buffer zones within national parks demonstrate the need for continued consultation between the two types of management. Strengthening surveillance systems, such as the “Interactive Forest Atlas” developed by CARPE at the request of neighbouring Congo Basin states, would definitely increase the traceability and legality of animal products everywhere, but we still need to find innovative solutions to encourage the local population, which is often migratory and susceptible to internal conflicts, to stop poaching and animal trafficking.

7. The local people are often ill-informed of their rights regarding the reallocation of forest rents, and the inhabitants of local villages have trouble communicating with the companies located in their zone, which makes applying the principle of common consent problematic. The village committees and rural councils stipulated in legislation do not always act as a focal point. To improve communication, companies have often ended up appointing internal staff to be responsible for relations with the local population. The CBFP has therefore emphasised the need to improve communication, for example by recruiting its employees from amongst these marginalised groups. The third principle of the FSC label relates to the rights of indigenous peoples and, when applied during the certification process, should already have triggered a change in the relationship between the various ethnic minorities in the forest zones and the logging companies. Forest concessions have affected the way of life for remote populations in both a positive sense (self-esteem, mobility and ambition) and a negative sense (diseases, food security and the recruitment of poachers).



Ultimately, the basic question of cultural identity relates to what can be regulated and rewarded without changing the culture of the local population, and how ethnic minorities envisage their future.

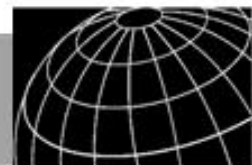
8. The role of local and international NGOs and their ability to raise awareness is under discussion in this specific context. Company representatives underscore their constructive relationships with local NGOs, who often take on the role of focal point at a village level, ensure grass-roots monitoring and defend the rights of the local population, not only in relation to logging companies but also in relation to the state. Representatives of several international NGOs were invited to speak at the workshop, but they preferred not to take part in this open exchange.

9. Following the example of the measures included in the concession holders' terms of reference to guarantee direct local spin-offs (which are sometimes difficult to implement, such as paying for traditional knowledge), a certain disparity has been noted between the efforts made by companies and those made by governments, which are not yet fully embracing their responsibilities. The forest rent paid by companies is not being redistributed, and it has been noted that the idea of sharing the benefits of this "state property" is not particularly well developed within national administrations. The same applies to the responsibility of drawing up training programmes that would enable young people to find skilled work within logging companies, and also to the possibility of curbing the influx of foreign workers in the forest sector, which pays above the national minimum wage. All these tasks are the government's responsibility. What emerges from the COMIFAC Executive Secretariat's intervention is that the problem of reallocating rents was defined at the last COMIFAC Council of Ministers as one of the priorities in the sub-regional forest sector, and that a study will be conducted on this subject with the support of the FAO.

10. Within the sub-region, there is a strong dependence on international markets, particularly Asia and the European Union. However, it would be desirable to develop the national and regional markets, and to integrate into them the informal sector, which is still poorly controlled. The existence of intense inter-African trade might have softened the effects of the current economic crisis, since demand exists in several non-forested African countries and, unlike international markets, these markets can be influenced by regional politics. However, they are less susceptible to guarantees of good governance, and require the development of new tools to obtain products with greater added value. Diversification therefore affects not only the markets but also the products derived, including those resulting from secondary processing. The timber residue and off-cuts abandoned in the concessions could be reworked by local labour to alleviate poverty.

11. The effects of the global economic crisis and the distribution of costs to keep the sub-region's forest sector afloat are currently the subject of lively debate. Recognising that this is sensitive information, the participants are asking for greater transparency in the turnover and profitability regularly communicated by logging companies, so that viable solutions can be put forward based on the market value of timber. The countries of the sub-region are therefore set to favour cross-sector responses and collaboration between different ministry departments to tackle more global problems linked to the isolated nature of the logging areas, for example energy, roads, education and health.

12. The participants have recognised that transparent communication is needed to enhance the image of Congo Basin timber, in order to reflect the true situation. It is the joint responsibility of governments, companies and CBFP members to inform public opinion, which may change its view on using tropical timber. As regards the much-deplored deforestation, there is still a need to stress the minor role of logging and highlight more important factors in the alarming deforestation caused by mining activities, fuel production and slash and burn agriculture.



It is important for the CBFP to understand that some questions relating to the sustainable exploitation of forest resources will not be adequately answered for the time being, and require the increased commitment of governments, civil society and institutions specialising in research. Good governance, particularly in the management of forest resources, therefore requires that the bodies concerned be constantly called to order.

Despite persistent but ultimately surmountable inadequacies, the progress made in managing forest concessions leads one to conclude that industrial logging, unlike other forest uses (such as mining), no longer presents a major risk to other environmental services in the forests of the Congo Basin. On the contrary, it is capable of speeding up the process of good management, which will supplement the good governance efforts undertaken by COMIFAC countries and embodied in various forest codes. On the basis of this progress, CBFP members are committing themselves to encouraging and promoting not only good governance, but also the development and application of sustainable management tools for all the operators in the sub-region's forest sector.