

Forest management plans in the Congo basin

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September 17 2012



More than half the forests in the Congo Basin have been allocated as concessions, and most are covered by Forest Management Plans (FMPs). The introduction of these plans – supported by French cooperation – brought an end to uncontrolled exploitation. Yet these developments are still overly concentrated on a few major groups. Introducing FMPs more widely and strengthening the state's capacity in the forestry sector remain key challenges for the future.

The forest of the Congo Basin – extending mainly across Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), Equatorial Guinea, Gabon, Cameroon, the Central African Republic (CAR), and the Republic of Congo – is the world's second-largest area of tropical forest after the Amazon rainforest, covering more than 200 million hectares (out of DRC).

In Cameroon, the forestry sector accounts for 6% of GDP, representing nearly 41 billion CFA francs (around €62.5 million) of tax revenues and 13,000 jobs in the formal sector. In the CAR, despite the low proportion of forest being exploited, the sector accounted for around 6.3% of GDP in 2007 and represents between 40% and 80% of export revenues, the proportion varying from year to year.

Overall, Gabon, Cameroon, the CAR and the Republic of Congo, the four countries in the scope of this paper, present a broadly similar forest environment, with forest resources of a similar character: dense forests, mainly closed-canopy, partly primary and partly secondary.

The deforestation rate is relatively low, at around 0.1% in the densely forested areas.

At the beginning of the 1990s, none of the forest was as yet under management; the first Forest Management Plans (*Box 1*) were just being introduced. The institutional situations were fairly similar at this time; harvesting was generally undertaken with volume-based timber licences. All these countries subsequently underwent broadly similar changes, with the adoption of forest laws and codes, and then standards incorporating the system of concessions and management obligations. Finally, economic and fiscal measures were introduced to reform the forestry sector – supported, in particular, by the World Bank.

Forest Management Plan (FMP)

The FMP is a tool for planning and sustainably managing a forest resource. Originally developed for the artificial forests of the northern hemisphere, it has been adapted for use in tropical forests. It is a contractual agreement between the concession holder and the state, designed to facilitate the transition from mining-type exploitation to sustainable exploitation, guaranteeing the renewal of natural capital, the preservation of biodiversity and the socio-economic development of neighbouring populations. One of the principles of Forest Management is to develop a more in-depth knowledge of the forest resources available in order to plan their management. The concession is divided into felling areas, only a proportion of which are exploited over a 25-30 year cycle, in a rotation system. This allows the forest resource to regenerate by the time the first

felling areas are revisited. No trees are felled without checking their diameter, so that young trees can continue to grow.

At the same time, the Management Plan concept has been expanded, incorporating a social component – designed to protect the associated economic activities of neighbouring populations – as well as taking into account the protection of biodiversity, including the preservation of existing wildlife.

Today, for the four countries at stake, 31 million hectares have been allocated in the form of forestry concessions, i.e. 51.3% of the major forest areas recorded in these countries. Nearly 20 million hectares are covered by management plans, of which 4.4 million hectares are certified as “sustainably managed” by the Forest Stewardship Council (FSC). In other words major progress has been achieved in the past twenty years. The AFD has contributed to this progress, building a fund of expertise which it can draw on now to undertake an overall analysis of how FMPs are working in the Congo Basin countries.

French cooperation - supporting the forestry sector

For twenty years, French assistance in the Congo Basin has pursued a markedly different strategy from that of other donors in delivering sustained support for the forestry sector. The various French cooperation stakeholders have developed complementary approaches: the Ministry of Foreign and European Affairs (MAEE) focused on institutional support to governments; the AFD Group provided support to private concession holders; and the French Global Environment Facility (Fonds Français pour l'Environnement Mondial, FFEM) concentrated on biodiversity issues. All French cooperation support has been determined by a common objective of supporting sustainable forest management, with the AFD specifically providing substantial support for the preparation of Forest Management Plans in the Congo Basin region.

During the 1990s, French cooperation in the sector was delivered mainly via Proparco, which supported private industrial investment. Significant investments were leveraged, benefiting the private sector and focused on a few major companies like Rougier and Pasquet, mainly in Cameroon (€5.5 million) and Gabon (€4.2 million). Alongside Proparco's initial investments, pilot projects were launched in forest management, by the MAEE in Cameroon and by the AFD.

In the late 1990s, the AFD provided financial support for major concession holders committing to FMPs. At the time, the operators most receptive to these loans – which were subject to conditions – were the major European concession holders. Gradually the AFD and Proparco expanded their support, including La Congolaise Industrielle des Bois, Pallisco in Cameroon or La Compagnie Équatoriale des Bois in Gabon. The AFD subsequently became involved in projects which allowed it to provide indirect support (via government loans or subsidies) to small and medium-sized private operators preparing FMPs. In particular, these projects enabled companies to externalise and mutualise the costs of preparing FMPs. In parallel, the MAEE provided institutional support to the ministries responsible for forests and forestry research. These responsibilities were transferred to the AFD from 2009.

During the 2000s, the FMP concept expanded to incorporate social and environmental components. The imperative of preserving biodiversity became a priority of French cooperation, prompting a wave of subsidies from the FFEM linked with AFD loans for FMPs (from 1999 to 2003). More recently, the AFD has opened up new spheres of intervention: conservation, the role of forests in carbon dioxide capture and storage, and involvement in mechanisms such as Reducing Emissions from Deforestation and Degradation (REDD).

Overall, during this twenty-year period, French cooperation has committed more than €120 million to the forestry sector in the Congo Basin. FMPs supported by the AFD represent 5.5 million hectares,

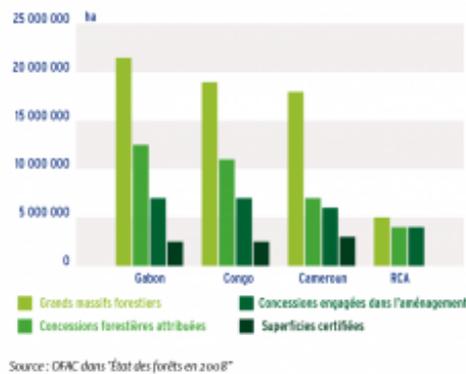
i.e. 17% of the allocated forest area. Its loans have provided a benchmark for establishing standards and developing legislation. The AFD has accumulated a fund of expertise relating to the Congo Basin forestry sector; the group's involvement in preparing and implementing FMPs gives it a clear view to measure the progress achieved in recent years.

Positive impacts observed

The development of the FMP as a tool, combining forest exploitation with the imperatives of sustainable management, has effected a break with the mining-style exploitation practices of the past. FMPs have allowed major operators to progressively participate in the change in practice. Management teams have now been established, and sustainable management is integrated in these businesses. FMPs have strengthened the companies' operational systems by facilitating a better awareness of the resources available, allowing production to be planned more efficiently. The company knows the location of the species it plans to harvest, how these species are distributed by diameter category, and the quality of the trees surveyed. Harvesting is more efficient and less expensive as a result. FMPs have also helped these companies maintain their position in European markets and to access new markets, and enabled them to respond to criticisms from international NGOs in the years between 1990 and 2000.

As a result, new relationships have evolved between private operators and the international NGOs. Initially taking opposing stances, now they have come as far as setting up concrete partnerships in the field, primarily relating to the design and implementation of biodiversity and social programmes. Today the forest is no longer solely the concern of the state, which grants concessions to the private sector. The major concession holders pay genuine attention to their employees' living conditions. Companies with certification have also put prudential anti-poaching measures in place: with controlled access to the concession, the closure of traditional trails and the supervision of logging trucks to prevent the transportation of meat. The big-game population has stabilised as a result.

FIGURE 1 : LA SITUATION DES AMÉNAGEMENTS FORESTIERS DANS LE BASSIN DU CONGO EN 2010



The legal, regulatory and standards environment has developed alongside FMP implementation. The system for allocating forestry concessions has become more transparent and objective. State/operator contracts are long-term agreements, which help to ensure secure supplies and to stabilise the timber sector as a whole. In addition, private operators have further diversified the range of species they harvest - and therefore the range of species processed. Today, out of the forests under concession (i.e. 31 million hectares), 20 million hectares are covered by high-quality management plans (Figure 1).

The capabilities of private operators and the forestry administration have been enhanced, management standards have been established, technical manuals have been published, and a broader dialogue - between the state, private operators and NGOs - is now ongoing. Practices have started to change. Even if they have significantly improved the initial situation, FMPs come up against a number of limitations - which can at times even threaten to compromise their goals.

Limitations observed

Although the FMP has now become a well-established instrument, the changes that have taken place remain confined to a few major groups. The majority of small and medium-sized concession holders continue to operate a strategy of intensive exploitation. These operators, after all, face various constraints: making changes in an organisation limited by its size and by traditional (or even family-based) management methods, as well as finding the investment to acquire the necessary forest management expertise. Moreover, setting up an FMP involves substantial costs which these companies cannot easily absorb - especially as the amortisation period for the expenses often covers a timescale exceeding their own economic reference timeframe.

Even among the large concession-holders questions remain regarding the genuine use of the FMP from a sustainable management perspective. According to a study by Germany's Agency for Technical Cooperation (Vandenhoute, M., Doucet, J.-L., 2006) covering the implementation of around 20 of the best FMPs in Cameroon, 75% of the management plans do not fulfil half of the criterias required by sustainability certification schemes. Among the major concession holders supported by the AFD, however, the results are more positive: 50% of the land area they cover is now certified, and according to observation of African Timber Organisation the level of criterias met stands at 75-80% (Larat, P., Lemelle, J.P., 2010). On the financing side, the role and commitment of the banks can also be questioned. The banks in the Congo Basin have excess liquidity - the problem is not therefore accessing primary capital but the banks' willingness to take risks in the forestry sector or their lack of knowledge in this field.

Governance in the forestry sector today is a major - if not the main - impediment to the success of sustainable forest management. While the state has conceded public resources it has not yet developed a genuine long-term vision, or neither requirement for visible results and outcomes monitoring. The agreements between the state and the private operators are sometimes regarded merely as the documentation required in order to proceed with harvesting. Regulatory provisions are not always followed - time-schedules for drawing up FMPs or specifications are not always observed, for example - and infringements are not adequately penalised by the administration. Moreover, although an improved knowledge of the resources is a clear benefit of FMPs, this knowledge is barely disseminated at all beyond the companies themselves and the research agencies involved. Administrations do not make use of this information themselves. The research, moreover, tends to concentrate on identifying the resources available and pays little attention to how these resources will evolve in the future. In more general terms, there is no evidence of any real reflection on the FMP model itself at government level - the impression is that this remains an imported model. The battle against illegal logging is far from won. A recent study undertaken in Cameroon (Pye-Smith, C., 2011) showed that the informal or illegal sector accounted for nearly 50% of timber production in this market. Furthermore substantial progress still needs to be made to improve observance of the social dimension of FMPs - and their biodiversity component, too.

FMPs have proved themselves to be an effective tool - yet the management and development model they propose clearly has limitations in several respects, too. In the Congo Basin the forest is still regarded by some simply as a resource to be exploited. In order to become more widespread, FMPs would benefit from being adapted, and simplified, to suit different situations and changing socio-economic circumstances. Additional sources of financing need to be found, especially to improve the plans' biodiversity and social impact components. Finally, governance in the countries involved needs to be improved; more effective monitoring and genuine buy-in on the part of governments is the key to making FMPs more effective.

At present there is a gap between the preparation of FMPs and their effective application in practice. Even so they are replicable, flexible tool - that has become an established feature of the forestry scene, and forestry legislation, in various countries, and that is helping to bring about changes in forestry practice. What is required now is to define strategies for supporting their effective implementation. Development agencies like AFD have a key role to play in supporting this process.

1 NB: this article draws on a retrospective external survey published in September 2011, entitled "Secteur forestier dans les pays du Bassin du Congo : 20 ans d'interventions de l'AFD" [The forest sector in the Congo Basin countries: 20 years of AFD intervention], by Jean-Marie Samyn and James Gasagna (Intercooperation, Switzerland), and Emmanuel and Fabien Pousse (Institutions et Développement, France) on behalf of the AFD. Please refer to this publication for more detailed information.

Comparing forest management concept of Brazil and Africa

Brazil has set up a system of timber concessions for its public forests based on a sustainable resource management model. Although the concessions granted so far cover an area of less than

100,000 hectares, a further one million hectares are in the process of being allocated. The stated target is around ten million hectares.

One of the big specificity of forestry management as practised in Brazil, compared with Africa, is the way forests are broken up into annual harvesting sites of equivalent area (without any prior evaluation of the resources available on the site), and the renewal conditions. The equivolume principle of annual harvesting sites is not applied, nor are management parameters (rotation periods, minimum exploitable diameter) set to ensure the renewal of forest resources. Some people see this approach as a major risk that could lead to unsustainability of the resource in the long term.

Moreover Brazil follows the concept of reduced-impact forest exploitation that is also used in the tropical forests of Africa. Brazil also goes further in its annual planning and appears to be further advanced than the countries of the Congo Basin when it comes to social and environmental aspects. Moreover, Brazil's forestry sector has the advantage of effective national institutions to support its forestry management policies.

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