

The good and bad of projects

The ex-post evaluation of two ITTO projects in Gabon reveals many lessons that can be used to improve future work

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No plan: A logging company has been given a long-term permit to log in the Bakoué Forest without presenting an operational logging plan. Photo: J. Gasana

FOLLOWING a decision of the International Tropical Timber Council at its 29th Session, ITTO undertook the ex-post evaluation of two completed projects in Gabon in the area of reforestation and forest management. They were:

- ITTO PROJECT PD 37/92 REV. 1 (F): *Preliminary studies and preparation of a management plan for the Bokoué Forest;*
- ITTO PROJECT PD 8/95 REV. 1 (F): *Multiple resource stratification, mapping and inventory for the management of the First Forest Zone in Gabon—Phase 1.*

These projects were part of efforts to assist ITTO members in achieving the Year 2000 Objective. This objective is a long-term endeavour that requires planning data and, for some countries, a way of validating and demonstrating management systems. In this context, PD 37/92 REV.1 (F) was formulated to assist in the integrated landscape-scale management of the Bokoué natural forest, plantations and agricultural areas. In its specific objective, the project aimed to collect the necessary data and to formulate a management plan for the Bokoué Forest, which covers an area of about 100 000 hectares. PD 8/95 REV. 1 (F) aimed to draw up a proposal for the allocation of land for the whole of the First Forest Zone of Gabon, which covers 4.9 million hectares.

The purposes of the evaluations were to assess the projects' effects and impacts, draw lessons from the experiences, and recommend follow-up measures for the sustainability of those effects and impacts. In April 2001 I conducted interviews with stakeholders and visited the projects' areas of influence. The reports subsequently presented to the Council provided in each case a number of findings, outlined the lessons learnt, and made recommendations

for policy, project design, implementation and post-project follow-up. This article makes a short summary of these reports with an emphasis on findings, lessons learnt and recommendations.

The Bokoué Forest management plan

Both projects were implemented by the Directorate of Forest Inventory, Management and Regeneration (DIARF), of the Ministry of Forests, Water and Reforestation. The Director of DIARF was directly in charge of their implementation, under the authority of the Director General of Forests and Water (DGEF).

Overall, both projects were implemented successfully in technical, managerial and financial terms, and their outputs were cost-effective. The training of staff in the use of modern forest inventory and mapping techniques contributed to strengthening the capacities of DIARF in conducting forest management activities. PROJECT PD 37/92 REV. 1 (F) produced the 'Bokoué Forest Management Plan', which is the first ever forest management plan in Gabon to be written on the basis of data from a forest inventory. This plan provides a good general model for the country's other forests. However, it was not developed through a consultative process involving key stakeholders, and the project failed to use such a process to build an implementation coalition with these stakeholders. In addition, the relevant authority has not yet officially approved the plan, and it is therefore not yet implementable.

As far as its content is concerned, the Bokoué Forest Management Plan cannot be deemed a comprehensive and integrated document. It emphasises almost exclusively one technical aspect, timber inventory. There is a lack of depth in the treatment of basic scientific information (eg

soils, biodiversity, habitat types). The socioeconomic and cultural analyses are insufficient, and the linkage between forest management and environmental and socioeconomic dimensions is not adequately established.

The implementation of this plan remains hampered by the lack of operational management plans. Furthermore, a logging company has been given a long-term permit to exploit the Bokoué Forest without complying with the good practices that the project sought to establish, namely the prior presentation of an operational management plan. As this permit was allocated outside the usual channel, which involves referring to the DGEF authority, it can be stated that the management planning initiated by the project has had a limited impact, as it failed to enhance accountable resource use procedures.

Mapping and inventory

PD 8/95 REV. 1 (F) was successful in establishing current and potential features of the First Forest Zone and providing thematic maps, conducting activities for land use zoning, installing a geographic information system (GIS) unit at DIARF headquarters, and developing the skills of the staff of the GIS laboratory. As a result, DIARF's mapping capabilities for forest management needs were significantly improved. In addition, with the outputs of the GIS laboratory DIARF was able to contribute to the decision-making process because of its better knowledge of regional forest resources. At the DGEF level, the allocation of logging permits can be planned in a more rational way than before. The location of production forests is more precise and former gross errors in the allocation of inappropriate areas to logging companies, or in the issuing of overlapping logging permits, can be avoided.

However, the GIS laboratory appears as a project within DIARF, and its institutional integration is incomplete. It is not therefore allocated the necessary budget to cover its maintenance and upgrading. In the longer term, its status as far as its location in DIARF is concerned is not clear. Indeed, DGEF also runs a mapping unit that provides information on the activities of the forest concessions. The question that arises here is why DGEF's mapping unit has not been reinforced by the project to enable it to meet DIARF's needs, instead of creating an additional project structure.

In purely technical terms, PROJECT PD 8/95 REV. 1 (F) was efficiently implemented and it provided several significant outputs. But it did not fully accomplish its prime aim of adoption of a land use plan proposed for the First Forest Zone, because the final decision by the relevant authority has been delayed. The institutional framework for implementing land use zoning was not well established. For example, the government did not set up an inter-institutional working group to advise it on land use zoning issues. The whole zoning task was given to one directorate, DIARF, of a relatively low rank in the Government apparatus, and which does not bear any responsibility in multi-sectoral regional planning and development programs. It can therefore be

stated that the project missed an important opportunity to show the nation that although forest management is often a local concern, decisions on forests and their utilisation must be placed in the context of national land use planning.

The successful implementation of these projects was due to the attention of the Director of DIARF, to the experience of the international consultants and to the guidance given by the project steering committees. However, the success was significantly limited by the low involvement of the other DGEF directorates and other stakeholders. Furthermore, the implementation arrangements created institutional bottlenecks due to the lack of effective, operational inter-institutional coordination.

Lessons learnt

PD 37/92 REV. 1 (F) ('Bokoué Forest Management Plan') suffered the problem of under-design. The project document did not give an adequate description of methodological tools, particularly those regarding the mobilisation of stakeholders and local community participation. Furthermore, inadequate preparation for the continuation of project activities in the post-project period remains its major weakness. The focus seems to have been limited to those technical outputs that were easy to accomplish.

While the forest inventory is an extremely important aspect of forest management, the project looked very much like a pilot inventory project. This shortcoming led to the loss of project momentum and to the termination of all the processes it helped to initiate. As a first lesson learnt, it is obvious that projects that must develop processes do not fit the model of intensive investments for mere technology transfer, whose perpetuation is possible only if external financial assistance is maintained. A connected lesson is that sustainability should be a preoccupation when a project proposal is being elaborated, and an exit strategy for continuing activities with appropriate partners in the absence of external funding should be developed. The aim should be to establish institutional entities that fit in well with existing structures and are not too much beyond foreseeable budget possibilities at the end of the project.

A third lesson that can be drawn from this project is the necessity of clarifying the amount and sources of recurrent budgets for the post-project phase. And a fourth lesson for field projects is the need to have a project manager separate from the government implementing authority and operating from a base that is close to and integrated with field activities.

Additional lessons learnt from PD 8/95 REV. 1 (F) ('Mapping and inventory') are as follows:

- for success in the implementation of complex land use zoning projects, inter-institutional coordination and arrangements must be established in order to facilitate decision-making by the relevant authority and to ensure enduring and positive impacts;

- heavy reliance on international expertise for most conceptual and operational support weakens the potential contribution of the project to institutional learning and building;
- when preparing for the purchase and installation of GIS hardware and software, it is important to anticipate the growing influx of data to be handled in order not to make mistakes in the specification of the equipment; and
- projects that introduce innovative practices should plan activities of capitalisation and dissemination of their results in order to achieve maximum impact on the development of policy and good practices, and to perpetuate the gains.

Recommendations

Based on the above findings, several recommendations can be made for both the Government of Gabon and ITTO. These fall into the categories of follow-up action, policy development and governance. The last two categories in particular have broader implications for project formulation and implementation, and are reported here.

Policy development

- For the long-term sustainability of impacts, ITTO should require that project proposals incorporate plans of how to continue key activities after project completion;
- ITTO and countries implementing projects should always carefully consider the repercussions of the heavy use of international consultants on project sustainability and institutional learning in the beneficiary country;
- the purpose of Bokoué Forest as a pilot management forest should be clarified. Such pilot forests (also known as demonstration or model forests) should aim to use the ITTO *Guidelines for the sustainable management of tropical forests* together with state-of-the-art techniques and technologies, adapting experiences gained elsewhere in tropical forest management, to demonstrate how Gabon's forests should be managed and to link field lessons with policy processes;
- in addition to the previous recommendation, the Government of Gabon should review its approach to the siting of pilot management projects and defining their objectives, and consider establishing at most one project per forest zone. Partnerships with the relevant logging companies should be developed in the implementation of such projects;
- for model forest projects, the planners need to consider, in addition to their sustainability, aspects concerning transferability of experiences as far as costs, process development, and management and silvicultural systems are concerned;
- the Government of Gabon should develop a financial mechanism that ensures a non-fluctuating source of finance to fund the administration, control and monitoring of sustainable forest management. For this,

a National Sustainable Forest Management Fund is recommended;

- there is a need for the systematisation of the experience of the project and publication of this systematisation;
- the Government of Gabon should make only strategic use of international consultants to develop internal capabilities, in order to allow national capacity building and institutional learning;
- the Government of Gabon and ITTO should explore how ITTO's contribution can be coordinated with the contributions of other donors in the development of the forest sector. This would require the development of a new forest action master plan, which is justified given that a new forest law is in the final stages of adoption; and
- the Government of Gabon should use the lessons learnt from PD 8/95 REV. 1 (F) to better conduct land use zoning of the Second Forest Zone.

Governance

- ITTO should use a program approach to ensure that its projects in Gabon are chosen in a way that optimises synergies among them and with projects funded by other donors;
- the Government of Gabon should delegate certain functions to other specialised partners, including national and international NGOs, in the implementation of activities such as biodiversity conservation studies and plans, local community development and mobilisation;
- for the continuation of land use zoning operations, the Government of Gabon should designate which service will play the lead institutional role in land use zoning, and set up an inter-ministerial working group to advise it; and
- the Government of Gabon should review the way ITTO projects are managed with the aim of reducing the excessive centralisation of activities in DIARF and enhancing their contribution to institutional learning and building, not only in DIARF but also in other DGEF directorates.

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