

# Out on a limb



## **Priority should be given to reforming and refocusing the humble forest management plan**

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**F**OR much of the last decade the international dialogue on forests has been preoccupied with certification. Although many of the problems raised with certification and its potential contribution to sustainable forest management remain to be resolved, it is time to review this preoccupation and perhaps to establish priorities that better promote sustainable forest management in the tropics. In my view, the forest management plan should be a top priority.

### **What is sustainable forest management?**

What do we really mean when we talk about 'sustainable forest management'? Let's dissect the term. Definitions continue to be debated, but we all have a fair idea of what a 'forest' is. The word 'management' is perhaps more interesting. It means that the actors—the 'managers'—are to implement certain strategies that will allow the forests to provide current and future generations (this is where 'sustainable' comes in) with the goods and services expected from the resource. These strategies must be based on the best available knowledge and underpinned by practical approaches and techniques to be applied directly in the field. For a manager, sustainable management does not consist merely of following a set of prescriptions; it is also about knowing how to organise in time and space the various actions (community relations, capital investments such as road-building, harvesting, etc) to be carried out in the forest in a process that should produce results consistent with sustainability.

### **Norms of results, norms of systems**

A first conclusion which can be drawn from this assertion is that what we call sustainable forest management is to be assessed against norms, usually called principles, criteria and indicators, related not only to what is intended to be reached in terms of structure, but also (and mainly) to the modalities of the management practices that are to be employed. In the end it will be the quality of the management practices

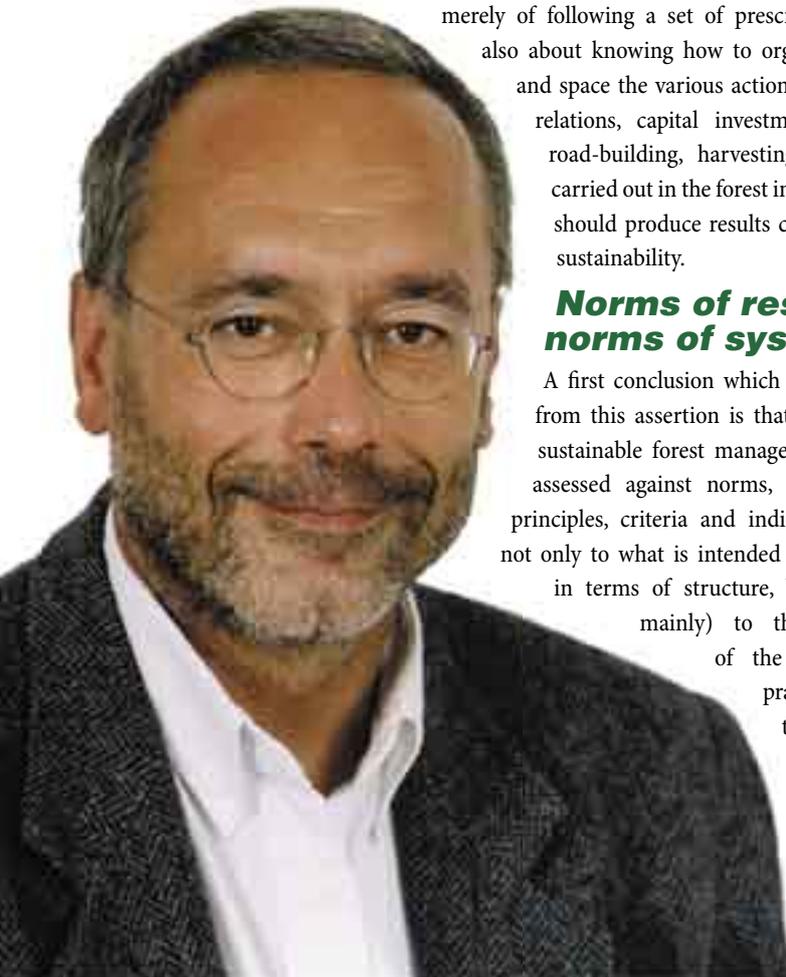
that will determine the success or otherwise of forest management, and they must be evaluated against the agreed norms.

But is this really what the international norms are used for at present? Probably not. In fact, criteria and indicators (C&I) agreed at the international level serve more as a common language for identifying the content of sustainable management. Progress has been slow, but ultimately important: sustainable forest management was a vague and abstract notion at the beginning of the 1990s; the identification of C&I has helped raised global awareness and understanding of the concept. And that is certainly something.

But the evolution of C&I should not stop there. If these norms are to become more than simply a common language, they need to be redefined in a way that enables their use as instruments for guiding the choices made by forest managers in the direction of the sustainability. Despite the involvement of some 120 countries in the various C&I processes that have developed over the past decade, less than half are actively using C&I for monitoring forest management, let alone for reporting on such management (originally a major rationale for developing a 'common language'). A move to the wider field implementation of C&I is the task that should now be our priority.

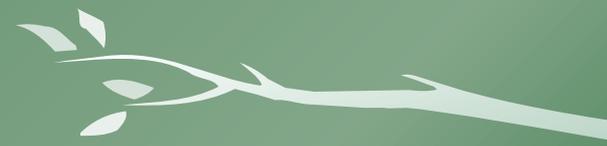
### **A management plan is unavoidable**

The necessary technical framework for such a redefinition is provided by the management plan. Ultimately it is the practices of the various actors, managers, users and more generally the beneficiaries of the forest's goods and services that cause forest loss and degradation. Reforming such practices is an essential element of sustainable forest management, as is encouraging the actors to take ownership of the process. Thus, the various actors must be assisted to pursue models of thinking and acting which will improve management through the use of appropriate methods and techniques. Properly developed, management plans can facilitate this process. Forest management plans are not in widespread use (or are not widely adhered to)



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in the tropics for technical and also strategic reasons but they should be strongly promoted as programmatic tools.

### **The management plan as a tool**

A management plan, based on sustainable forest management criteria and indicators, can of course work as a prescriptive instrument for evaluation and control, and it is often presented as such. But this is not its most important role. The management plan should be first considered as a tool in the hands of the managers and users that can provide some answers to the tangible problems they face in their daily activities. Certainly, some important progress has been made over recent years, especially through the initiatives of industrial companies and their associations, such as the International Technical Association for Tropical Timber (ATIBT) and the Inter-African Forest Industry Association in Central and West Africa. Due mainly to the pressure of some environmental non-governmental organisations, with whom a timid dialogue is now starting, some of the larger timber companies in the region are expressing a greater willingness to implement rules of sustainable management translated into formal management documents.

### **What kind of management plan is needed?**

The management plans to be developed with this objective will be very different from those we are used to, including in developed countries. The new management plans will not be restricted to issues related to timber production or to the role of a sole decision-maker.

In developing countries, the forest cannot be isolated from the other uses of the land; it is one of the elements to be used in the promotion of rural development. Of course, the forest provides various ecological, economic and social utilities that have to be taken into consideration when defining management modalities. But for it to play an active role in development, the forest should not be separated from its surroundings, and the management plans must be defined at a broader landscape scale, one that considers the context within which the forest resource must be managed. Based on the best available knowledge of the social and economic challenges, the plans have to select the practices to be carried out and to consider their impacts on the environment and on rural activities.

### **Plans to be negotiated among local actors**

Forest management must aim to produce various benefits, and the beneficiaries will also be various. The conservation of biodiversity requires the engagement of many actors, and all must gain economic and social benefits. Here we have moved far from mono-actor management. The managers, especially the harvesting companies, are central figures in such a dynamic but they are not the only ones concerned about what happens in the forest. Management

plans should be multi-actor decision-making tools whose content is negotiated among the various stakeholders. Only plans that state the rights and responsibilities of all stakeholders and form the basis of effective partnerships in carrying out the prescribed actions and sharing the benefits can promote local development on a sustainable basis. Methodologies that combine negotiation and decision-making techniques with best-available information and ecosystem management frameworks are available. They just need to be adapted to tropical forests.

At a time when the tropical forests continue to be lost at the global scale there is no need to discuss over and over the elements of sustainable management. The most urgent need now is to start concrete actions, even without complete knowledge, and to carry out these actions in an adaptive way.

The momentum for this may be gathering. In Central and West Africa, for example, things are already changing. The *Principles, criteria and indicators for sustainable forest management in African natural tropical forests* (PCI), a document just published by ITTO and the African Timber Organisation (ATO) (see page 19), afford high priority to developing a complete set of forest management documents at the forest management unit level designed to provide forest managers with the guidance they need to implement sustainable forest management in the field. These documents must clearly state the objectives of management and define the management practices, including the formal modalities and the responsibilities of actors—not only those of the contracting harvesting companies. These management documents are to be formally approved by the public authority and the way they are implemented strictly controlled by the forest department.

In their official declaration of Kinshasa in October 2002, the ministers in charge of forests in the ATO member countries stated their full commitment to implementing the ATO/ITTO PCI, and they consequently decided to accelerate the elaboration of forest management plans. It is important to now translate these commitments to action. The recently funded ITTO project to support the ATO in training forestry staff in African member countries on implementing the PCI is a first step; other institutions would do well to support this initiative with complementary action. The humble management plan can provide the focus that is needed to draw all these disparate initiatives, intentions, principles, criteria and indicators together so that field action can start.