

Forest certification is developing slowly in Africa, and faces major hurdles

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THE concept of certification has received plenty of attention in Central and West Africa. Since 1994, the African Timber Organization (ATO) has been deliberating on the establishment of a green label for timber produced in its member countries. In cooperation with other organisations it has conducted field tests on criteria and indicators for sustainable forest management in Côte d'Ivoire (1995), Cameroon (1996), Gabon (2000) and Central African Republic (2000). National certification working groups were established in Ghana in 1996, Cameroon (1996) and Gabon (2000).

ATO has also been collaborating closely with ITTO, culminating in the publishing earlier this year of the *ATO/ITTO Principles, criteria and indicators (PCI) for the sustainable management of African natural forests* (see TFU 13/1). These are a tool for monitoring forest management in member countries at the national and forest management unit (FMU) levels and, as such, constitute a positive step towards certification. A recently funded ITTO project (PD 124/01 REV.2 (M)), which is being implemented jointly by ATO and ITTO, is helping to train forestry staff in African ITTO member countries to put the PCI into practice.

A number of other favourable conditions can be identified for the development of certification in the regional context:

- there are 250 million hectares of tropical moist forest in Central and West Africa, and the State is the sole owner of the forest;
- regional and national institutional frameworks exist and have the capacity to cooperate with international partners;
- human resources are available (but training is needed);
- national certification working groups comprising representatives of the main stakeholder groups have been set up in some countries (Côte d'Ivoire—1995, Cameroon—1996, Gabon—2000 and Central African Republic—2000) to sensitise concerned parties to certification and to adapt the PCI to suit local conditions; and
- some certification schemes have expressed interest in being present and active in the region.

The national certification working groups established to date in Africa have proved useful. Cameroon's, for example, has sensitised many stakeholders by conducting training workshops at national and regional levels; convinced many forest concessionaires to take part in forest certification; established good relationships with national, regional and international organisations in charge of conservation and sustainable forest management; collaborated closely with the forestry administration in order to use the PCI to evaluate management in FMUs; elaborated national certification PCI; carried out some pre-audits of certification; and participated in studies related to the creation of producers' groups in the region.

Serious gaps

Nevertheless, for now certification remains mostly a concept rather than a reality in Africa, one that is difficult for local

stakeholders to pursue and adopt. Moreover, there are serious gaps between the actual level of forest management and the requirements of certification schemes, and a lack of funds to implement certification in the field. And there are other major constraints, including:

- a lack of concrete arguments to convince government authorities of the importance of certification;
- the low interest of the private sector, comprising major European multinationals, to enter into certification processes;
- the weakness of African civil society to integrate this new concept;
- the high cost of implementing forest management in African tropical forests; and
- a lack of national expertise to carry out activities related to certification.

The following actions are recommended (based on the recommendations of the regional workshop on phased approaches—see page 22):

- ITTO should develop a credible, phased approach to certification;
- all those African countries where field tests have been conducted should establish national certification working groups; and
- the ATO should establish a regional working group including the various national certification working groups, representatives of countries without certification initiatives, and observers, in order to add impetus to the creation of a Panafrican certification scheme.

Prospects for certification in Cameroon

Cameroon's national forests are divided into 110 FMUs ranging in size from 30 000 to 150 000 hectares; each has been allocated by international tender to major European multinationals. A company winning a bid has three years to pass from a provisional agreement to a definitive agreement. During these three years, a management plan must be elaborated and implemented; therefore, any evaluation or audit for certification will be carried out starting from the fourth year. Consequently we hope that some FMUs allocated in 1998/99 will be certified by the end of 2003, because a couple of the FMUs looked promising in early field evaluations.

Apart from the commercial concessions, Cameroon has also established a network of community forests, which are to be managed by and for the benefit of local communities. However, even though many community forests have been allocated, their management is fraught with difficulty, and any credible attempts at certification seem a long way off.

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