The numbers game in Gabon

A series of ITTO projects have helped strengthen forest statistics in Gabon, but the full implementation of a national system requires more support from government

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Statistical outlier? On-site data collection can be hazardous. *Photo: Irina Kouplevatskaya*

GOOD management of an economy requires, first and foremost, a good information base. This holds true in the forest sector: a thorough knowledge of the structure of the national forest sector is essential for managing the timber production and processing economy.

It is imperative that all the stakeholders understand this, whether they are administrators or operators. Only a thorough understanding of the market situation can enable the accurate forecasting of trends, on which a whole range of governmental and private-sector decisions must be based. For government, good information allows the rational and efficient determination of revenues from taxes and their differentiation according to product categories, as well as the strategic development of infrastructure. Industrialists and private operators can direct their investments towards those fields that will best allow the development of local potential.

The exchange of views organised between neighbouring countries could breed success, and each country could avoid a repetition of failures and difficulties.

Knowledge depends on the availability of reliable data on production and the marketplace, although information in this field can never be perfect. Some forest-sector statistics—in fact the majority of them—are drawn from operators' reports and can therefore be distorted by those who may have an interest in under- or over-declaring numbers, or sometimes in not declaring them at all. That apart, even comprehending the full scale of certain activities can prove to be a long, difficult, expensive and sometimes illusory process. Thus, statistics must inevitably be a compromise between reliability and timeliness, because economic choices must often be made with relatively little notice.

ITTO's conceptual support

Knowing the importance of statistics, ITTO has undertaken a process to support tropical timber-producing countries in improving their systems of forest and timber data collection. Many producer countries have received substantial assistance from ITTO since the early 1990s for the development of computer-based statistical systems. Parallel to these national projects, regional initiatives have been training forest personnel involved in the collection and processing of statistical information on forests and timber. These efforts have resulted in a significant improvement in the quality of the information obtained and, in turn, have led to increased rigour in data processing. They have also improved the reliability of subsequent economic analyses that are used for, among other things, ITTO's *Annual Review and Assessment of the World Timber Situation*.

However, statistical capacity still needs to be strengthened in many countries, even in places where significant improvement has been brought about by ITTO projects. One such case is Gabon, where an ITTO project (PD 56/00 REV.3 (M)) was completed recently and evaluated in 2005. This article summarises the findings of the ex-post evaluation and makes some recommendations for the future.

The sequence of improvement

ITTO has supported a long-running process in Gabon designed to improve the collection and processing of statistics on forests and timber. It began in 1994 with ITTO PROJECT PD 36/92 (M), the objective of which was the computerisation of timber-processing data collected manually at the level of inspectorates governed by the Directorate General of Water and Forests (*Direction Générale des Eaux et Forêts*), and has continued in four successive phases.

One of the initial project's achievements was the establishment of a statistics department responsible for the publication of a statistical yearbook on forests and timber. The often considerable time taken by the inspectorates to communicate data, as well as the risk of repeating errors during data collection and processing—which were still carried out manually—led to the setting up of a second phase (ITTO PROJECT PD 29/96 REV.1 (M)). From 1997 to 1998, this project contributed to the full computerisation of data processing on timber harvesting at the level of each Water and Forests inspectorate. To that effect, it created a data-processing module called STATFOR. An ex-post evaluation carried out in

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1999 confirmed the validity of this approach but drew attention to the need for the system to be made operational throughout the country as soon as possible.

The third phase of the process (ITTO PROJECT PD 15/98 REV.2(M)), which took place in 2000–2001, continued the work of computerising data collection, including at the level of the harvesting site. An experimental system called EXFOR was developed to make it possible both to replace a paper-based approach with electronic notebooks (hand-held computers) and to track the products by means of bar codes.

The fourth phase of Gabon's forest statistics development (ITTO PROJECT PD 56/00 REV.3 (M)) took place in 2002 and 2003. The tasks were to adapt the EXFOR module to a Windows operating system and to design data-processing modules for upstream management (INVFOR for management inventories) and downstream for exports (COMFOR on timber flows in lumberyards); this would allow the tracking of logs entering the international market and facilitate labelling under certification schemes.

With a fifth phase of the process due to begin in 2006 (ITTO PROJECT PD 182/03 (M)), the sequence of improvement will be completed. By the end of this project, Gabon will have a fully computerised system for the collection and processing of data on the activities of its primary timber industry, activated in several pilot regions/concessions. It should then be possible to know precisely and with a reduced risk of error all the elements characterising the flow of wood products within the sector. The Gabonese experience constitutes a model applicable elsewhere, particularly in other Congo Basin countries; a good starting point for other countries would be Gabon's third phase, which set out to leap-frog technology in field-data collection.

Difficulties in nationwide implementation

The series of projects implemented in Gabon has seen the introduction of a sophisticated data-processing system in various parts of the country. Nationally, however, there has been little change, with most data collection and processing still carried out as per the practice at the beginning of the 1990s. In fact, the development of the computer modules has been gradually disconnected from the issue of their national application. Powerful data-processing tools are available, which should allow the effective improvement of statistics, but the mechanisms for large-scale application are not yet ready. This disconnection between the model approach and reality can be attributed in large part to issues of organisational management that are not unique to Gabon: the transfer of personnel trained in statistics to different departments, and administrative re-organisations that change the methods for monitoring statistics. Moreover, the funding requirements of some tasks related to statistics (eg publication of the yearbook, procurement of computer hardware, etc) are not easily met by the national budget. This results in a situation where decision-makers do not benefit from the improved statistical information that should normally be derived from the model approach.

Conditions for effective improvement

Clearly, the successful development of a functioning model of data collection and processing techniques is not sufficient in itself; it must be accompanied by measures for its large-scale implementation. Some of the conditions that must be met if the type of activities ITTO has funded in Gabon are to translate into a comprehensive national system within the national forestry administration include the following:

- initially, as a matter of priority, there must exist at the national level a clear strategy aimed at improving statistics, whether or not it is integrated into the national forestry program. This strategy should be perceived by the country as an approach to ownership of the project results. It must clearly define national objectives to be achieved within a given time-frame, identify those departments responsible for optimising the financial and human capacities available, and institute a transparent system for monitoring and evaluating national inputs;
- the setting up of an international system of training in statistics, together with ongoing evaluation, would speed up the dissemination of lessons learned by each country in a region where similar conditions prevail. The exchange of views organised between neighbouring countries could breed success, and each country could avoid a repetition of failures and difficulties. The joint training of personnel in charge of statistics in countries in the same region would also benefit from being interlinked with the regional evaluation process and thereby be more focused on practical needs; and
- the linkage of the outputs of the statistical system with enhanced abilities to levy and collect forest rents would generate more support for the system from outside the forest sector/administration (eg in finance departments).

These conditions, which imply both a country's commitment and the support of the international community, would help to remedy the difficulties encountered with the large-scale achievement of forest-statistics-related objectives. They are to be made explicit in ITTO PROJECT PD 182/03 (M), the fifth and last phase of the process designed to improve forest and timber statistics in Gabon. If this project leads to the country-wide adoption of the suite of data collection and processing modules developed to date, it will be a significant step forward for both Gabon and many of its neighbours, most of whom are at earlier stages of statistical development.

Sources

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