

Out on a limb



Not enough attention is being paid to building forest management capacity within Africa's civil society

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IN 1992, we brought home from the Rio Summit two concepts—sustainable forest management (SFM), and certification—whose application is now apparently indispensable. More than ten years on, however, neither has made much advance in West or Central Africa. There are many reasons for this, but one that rarely gets much international air time relates to the capacity of ordinary people—civil society—to understand the concepts, apply them and, most importantly, benefit from their application. The big question, therefore, is this: what can be done to build the capacity of stakeholders in civil society?

I have written previously (*TFU* 13/3, page 19) about the limited progress being made towards certification in Africa. Capacity is not just lacking in civil society, but in government and the private sector as well: of the 14 African Timber Organization member

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states, which together represent 237 million hectares of natural tropical forest, only five have carried out field-testing of the ITTO/ATO *Principles, criteria and indicators for the sustainable management of African natural tropical forests* (PC&I), only three have national norms adapted to ITTO/ATO standards, only four have operational national certification working groups, only one is carrying out a study on chain of custody, and only Gabon has a certified forest (about 650 000 hectares certified under the Keurhout scheme). Nevertheless, capacity in government and the private sector (meaning the larger forest concessionaires) is still far greater than that in the villages and other communities which must inevitably play a pivotal role if SFM and certification are to be achieved at a significant scale.

Who are we talking about?

Civil-society stakeholders in the African forest sector include:

- intermediary organisations active at the local level, such as local non-governmental organisations (NGOs), cooperatives, federations of community organisations, and local NGO networks; and

- grassroots organisations such as producer associations, associations of natural resource users, professional associations, and community banks.

Apart from ITTO, many international and regional organisations are active in the region, including the Central African Regional Programme for the Environment (CARPE), the UK Department of International Development, the Center for International Forestry Research, German Technical Cooperation (GTZ), the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations, the World Wide Fund for Nature, IUCN, ACDI/VOCA, the Wildlife Conservation Society, the French Agricultural

Research Centre for International Development (CIRAD), and others

(some of which are described

on pages 11–13). But despite the presence of so many

organisations, few efforts are being made to train marginalised minorities such as pygmies, women and youth in the complexities of modern forest resource management, even

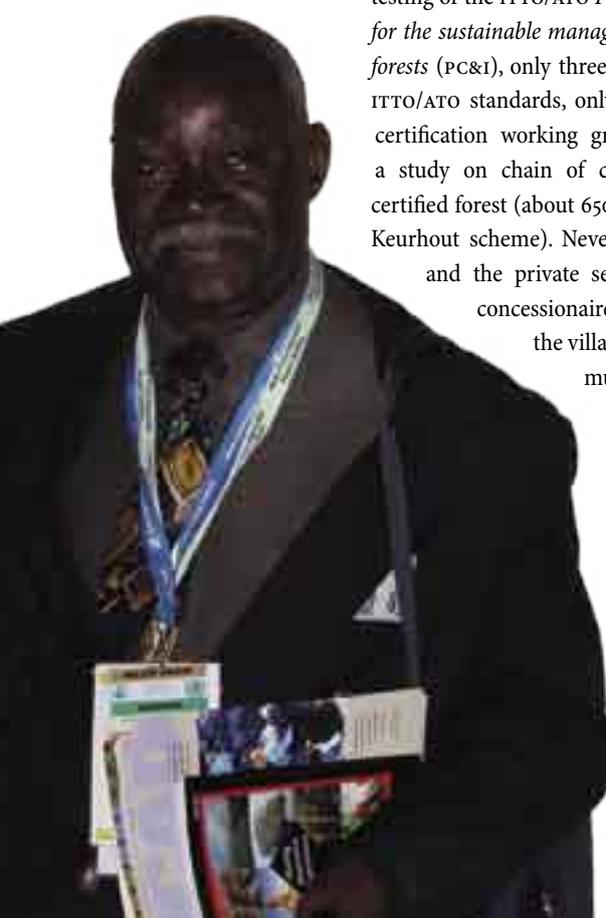
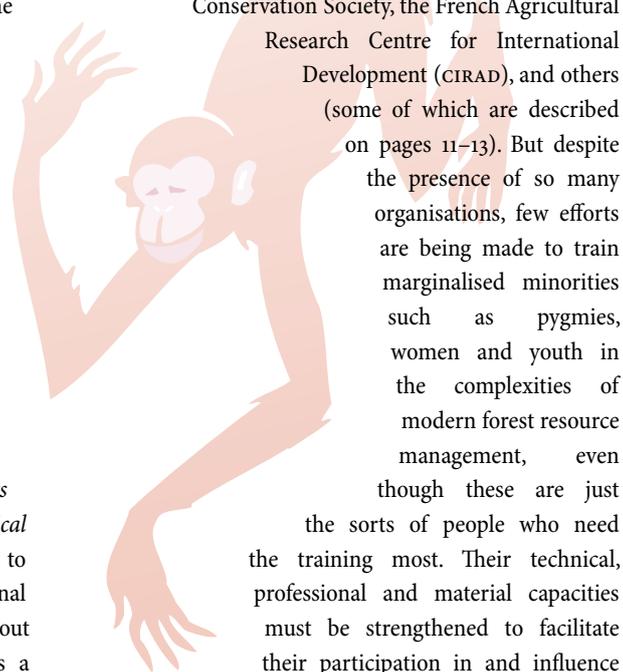
though these are just

the sorts of people who need the training most. Their technical, professional and material capacities must be strengthened to facilitate their participation in and influence on decision-making about the resources they use and rely on.

Indeed, many development agencies have serious difficulties in collaborating with grassroots' civil-society organisations and in enabling their empowerment in forest management. Some of the reasons for these difficulties are described below.

Obstacles

The inability of foreign forestry experts to communicate with local communities: to conduct any training you need to speak the language of your trainee; you need to be able to get your messages across and to evaluate the degree to which training was 'taken onboard'. Consequently, foreign experts with little or no knowledge of local community languages are ill-equipped to carry out training in Africa's rural communities. There are more than 280 tribes in Cameroon, for example: such cultural and linguistic diversity presents a





huge communication challenge for outsiders. Very often, the use of an interpreter can completely transform the message and create confusion and distrust. I have observed just such a situation between the village community of Ebondje, inside the Lokoundjé Forest Management Unit in Kribi, south Cameroon, and the experts of an international cooperation agency. The result was that the local community later rejected other training organised for its benefit.

The waltz of new concepts: local communities should be strongly involved in any process that affects the management of and access to resources on which they depend. It is important, therefore, that they have a good understanding of the process and the ideas underpinning it. But concepts abound: think, for example, about SFM, certification, auditing, criteria and indicators or—the latest—ecosystem management. How can these be explained to villagers? What do they really mean? The result of so many buzzwords, each of which comes with its own rather fuzzy definition (and some with several definitions), is confusion; communities get the sense that many outsiders are not really sure what they're doing. Rationalising the terminology might help: in certification, for example, we have the stepwise approach, the phased approach and the modular approach: are these interesting concepts equal, equivalent, comparable or compatible? Such a large range of tunes makes it difficult for local communities to understand the music.

Red tape: the labyrinth that must be negotiated by communities to secure funds for training is too bureaucratic and complicated; consequently, most projects to develop capacity in the forestry sector are designed without civil-society participation. Very often, it seems, good governance is just on paper, or for other people.

ITTO's role

What role can ITTO play to improve the situation? I have conducted two ITTO workshops in Cameroon on capacity-building related to criteria and indicators for the sustainable management of natural tropical forests, in collaboration with Don Widjewardana (Samgmelima regional workshop, February 2001) and Dr Marie Mbolo (Kribi national workshop, January 2003). These workshops were effective in reaching both government and private-sector officials; this was, indeed, their aim. But without complementary efforts to inform civil-society actors and to increase their capacity to understand and engage in forest management processes, ITTO's efforts in this regard will leave the job half-done.

Excluding local communities from capacity-building widens the gap between civil society and the government and private sectors and creates frustrations in those communities.

We may face the same problem during the six years of implementation of the ITTO/ATO project (PD 120/01 REV.2 (M)), which aims to promote the application of the ATO/ITTO PC&I by training up to 600 specialists. This project is

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necessary and valuable, but it needs to be complemented by similar efforts to reach civil-society actors. Likewise, ITTO projects that do help build capacity at the local community level—of which there are several—need to be strengthened and supported in the long term.

From where I stand, building the capacity of Africa's civil society is a crucial issue that ITTO must address. The Civil Society Advisory Group, which was set up to advise the International Tropical Timber Council and comprises representatives of a range of non-governmental organisations with interests in tropical forests, should take up this issue and bring it to the attention of the Council. In fact I am wondering: if ITTO—with its ability to stimulate ground-level action in Africa and empower local organisations—doesn't do it, who else will? I fear that if it doesn't, Africa's natural forest management will remain a beautiful road to heaven, paved with nice concepts that are inaccessible to our grassroots' organisations.