



Space should be made for the genuine negotiation of forest management plans in Africa

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FOREST management planning has been promoted strongly in the Congo Basin forests of Central Africa over the last ten years or so. This approach deviates from the traditional mining practices used in timber operations and aims to integrate socially equitable, ecologically sustainable and economically viable practices using the forest management plan as its basic tool. Although significant progress has been made, many obstacles still stand in the way of this approach. The social component, for example, is far from being incorporated satisfactorily.

It is now commonly acknowledged that the establishment of sustainable management in Central Africa requires a consensus between the main partners involved (Estève 2001); decisions should no longer be at the exclusive discretion of the forest manager, who strives to develop the forest on the basis of technical and scientific knowledge (Bertrand et al. 1999). Therefore, the contents of the management plan should be the result of negotiation between the various stakeholders.

As noted by Buttoud (2003), planning methodologies are available that combine decision-making, communication and negotiation processes—they just need to be adapted to tropical forests. Today, experts in forest management find themselves in the same labyrinth as experts in protected areas were in ten years ago. The involvement of local populations and other stakeholders and the development of a partnership culture in the management of protected areas were a black box that was only decoded after a great deal of conceptualising and field-testing. The results obtained may not yet be entirely successful, but the lessons learned can be very useful at the methodological level.

Socialising forest management

The social component of forest management is certainly present in efforts to identify principles, criteria and indicators of sustainable forest management. In the *ATO/ITTO Principles, criteria and indicators for the sustainable management of African natural tropical forests* (ATO/ITTO 2003), for example, social sustainability is addressed by Principle 4, which emphasises the quality of relations between the forest concession manager, forest workers and the community in general. The principle's associated

criteria and indicators aim to promote a culture of dialogue, participation and negotiation in the choice of management objectives and to maximise the contribution of concessionaires towards basic social infrastructure such as for health and education.

Status

This is much easier said than done. *The practical management plan for African natural production forests* published by the International Technical Tropical Timber Association (ATIBT) in 2001 lists the following actions related to the social component of forest management:

- analyse the socioeconomic status of the populations;
- improve the living standard and well-being of the rural population and the company's labour force;
- uphold and exercise the people's customary rights;
- support the organisation and development of socio-economic activities;
- collect information on hunting and poaching; and
- implement measures to limit hunting and control poaching.

To some extent, these actions are being taken into account in the development of management plans in Gabon, Cameroon, the Congo and the Central African Republic. However, many foresters remain

dissatisfied. What is missing in the above list is any action aimed at the genuine participation of local stakeholders in the making of decisions related to the establishment and management of the forest concession itself.

Lessons learned from protected-area approaches

In Africa at least, the present approach to social issues taken by concessionaires cannot be said to be fully participatory. There are many reasons for this, as explained by Pierre (in prep). One of them is that, in general, the social dimension of forest management still seems to be an abstract and fuzzy concept that is interpreted diversely according to the representations and interests of the various parties involved. This problem of understanding is compounded by the lack of a methodology suitable for the complex social environments we find in Africa.

The *table* (next page) divides the process of forest management

Tough negotiators: Photo: CIB



Becoming more participative

Main development stages of a forest management plan (social aspects) and associated current and desired actions

STAGE	IMPLIED ACTION	
	CURRENT	DESIRED
Analysis	Socioeconomic surveys	Participative diagnosis (representations, appropriation and access norms, usage, prospects, etc)
Formulation of management rules	Procedure for the participation of local actors	Negotiations of agreements; agreement mechanisms; conflict management; role distribution; cost- and benefit-sharing; local development plan
Dissemination and approval of plan	Information meeting, posters; ministerial order or decree enforceable by law	Campaign of local communication; recognition of agreements written in the management plan, both socially and in writing (ministerial order), etc
Implementation of plan	Development and implementation of social projects, support for access to community forests, forest taxes, employment	Instituted dialogue platform (forum) and monitoring structure (participative monitoring, conflict prevention/ resolution processes, mutual control)

plan development into four stages and shows associated actions, both current and desired; the latter are based on lessons learned from the participative management of protected areas in the region. During the first stage, ‘analysis’, socioeconomic investigations should be conducted in a participative manner in order to prepare the actors for negotiation. The pivotal stage is the one in which ‘management rules’—which, incidentally, warrant a more neutral name—are developed. This should be tackled within a paradigm of negotiation and the resulting specific agreements on rules and processes should be included in the management plan; the use of a facilitator (or mediator), particularly during this stage, would be highly advantageous. The last stage, the implementation of the plan, should allow as much scope as possible for actors to ‘learn by doing’, because this will help in the participatory, adaptive management process that will continue on.

Mixed model

The lessons learned from the participatory management of protected areas can certainly help forest managers to advance the development of management plans for forest concessions through genuine negotiation, but it is important to be realistic. If industrial-level forestry is to be successful and sustainable it must be profitable; the management planning process should not place insurmountable obstacles in the way of that. What is needed is a workable and efficient process that both empowers and benefits local stakeholders and delivers profitability to the concessionaire. An approach similar to that proposed by Buttoud and Samyn (1999), in which certain elements of the plan (eg forest access, benefit-sharing, etc) are fully negotiated while others (eg road engineering standards, allowable cut, etc) are set in accordance with regulatory or industrial norms, might work best; each process would need to define those measures that would be prescribed and those eligible for a negotiated approach.

Concluding remarks

The time has come to conceptualise and then operationalise a practical approach to the social component of sustainable

forest management. Outsiders—both prospective concessionaires and those calling for boycotts against tropical timber—will need to be patient, because participatory processes do not happen overnight and nor are they ever perfect. Moreover, the task of realising a truly sustainable social setting for timber production is not one reserved for foresters only; all actors will need to have a say.

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