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Gabon to scale up community-based forestry in drive to alleviate poverty



©FAO/Gershrill Mengome. Greeting between H.E. Pacôme Moubelet Bouyeba, State Minister for Forests and the Environment, Gabon and FAO Forestry Officer, Jean Claude Nguingui, with Lionel Kinadjian, representing the FAO Sub-Regional Coordinator for Central Africa (SFC), to mark cooperation in the implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals.

Participatory forestry in context

As evidence mounts of the limitations of centralized, top-down approaches to forestry decision-making, an increasing number of governments are turning to other forms of forestry management to help alleviate poverty, increase sustainable forest management, and spur local and national sustainable economic growth and development.

Within the broader paradigm of community-based forestry (CBF), there are two main forestry streams: participatory (collaborative forms of CBF); and private ownership (smallholder forestry). In Gabon only the collaborative forms of CBF are practised, encompassing joint management of customary territories inside industrial forest concessions, joint management of buffer zones around protected areas, and community forests. This form of participatory forestry takes place on 242,192 ha, one percent of total forest land.

Local people are at the core of participatory forestry, which is based on inclusive consultations with forest communities, and facilitating their systematic involvement and empowerment in all aspects of national forest programme planning, management and monitoring. As Gabon's experience in participatory forestry has shown, this approach can yield many benefits, which could increase significantly as the approach is scaled up. With suitably trained local people at the helm and more rigorous governance and enforcement of timber legality, there is a stronger guarantee that benefits will accrue locally, forests are managed sustainably and the integrity of biodiversity and ecosystem services is maintained.

The Gabon experience

As part of its mandate, the Ministry for Forest and Environment of Gabon aims to promote and develop community-based forestry. Since 2013, it has supported the establishment of 51 community forests and has received over 150 new requests, indicating a significant rise in popularity among local communities for this form of forestry. However, due to the alarming extent of illegal timber exploitation in the country, in 2017 the newly appointed Minister of Forest and Environment, H.E. Moubelet Boubeya, sought a temporary suspension of both the review of requests and the granting of licences for new community forests.



Mission Évaluation de la Foresterie participative DGF-FAO

Étape FC NGOKOELA-Ovan

©Hervé-Charles Ndume-Engone. Evaluation mission visit to FC Ngokoela-Ovan, Gabon and members of the local community.

In a major attempt to better understand the challenges impeding community-based forest regimes from reaching their full potential, the Ministry requested FAO technical and financial support in conducting an assessment of community-based forestry so as to more clearly identify the key reasons for the underperformance of the CBF regimes . Using the FAO-developed “Framework to assess the extent and effectiveness of community-based forestry”, a mission comprising the Director of Community Forestry, Mr Hervé-Charles Ndume-Engone, a national consultant, Mr Léon Nguimbi and FAO Forestry consultant, Didier Habimana, travelled in the Ogooué-Ivindo province to visit three community forestry associations in Laboka, Ovan and Ebyeng.



©FAO/Gesrhil Mengome. From left to right, Ms S. Ratiarison, FAO/SFC forestry expert; J.C. Nguingui, Forestry officer, FOA; H.E. Moubelet Boubeya, Minister of Forests and Environment of Gabon; L. Kinadjian, Fishery Officer, SFC; S. Ntem, Director-General of Forests, Gabon; D. Mapaga, Deputy DG of Forests; H. Ch. Ndume-Engone, Director Community Forestry; Mbia Barry, Deputy Director-General Forest Industry; Patrick Ollomo, Gabonese National Park Service.

The mission supported the national consultant in collecting necessary data for the completion of the framework, which in part also relies on the experiences of local practitioners of participatory forestry regimes. Major issues raised by the communities and identified by the mission in the study were presented at the validation workshop in Libreville.



©FAO/Louis Tona. Opening of the Libreville Validation Workshop. Centre, H.E. Pacôme Moubelet Bouyeba, Minister for Forests and the Environment, Gabon, to his left, Ms. Tatiana Raissa Mebouja Bithege, Deputy Secretary General of the Ministry for Forests and Environment, Gabon, to Minister's right, Lionel Kinadjian, Fishery Officer, SFC, representing FAO.

Validation workshop: key issues and outcomes

Following the opening of the workshop by the Minister for Forests and the Environment, more than fifty participants representing Gabon's main legal, forestry and financial institutions as well as representatives of development partners, including FAO, began two days of focused discussions.



© FAO/ Louis Tona – Participants at the Libreville validation workshop

The national consultant presented three CBF regimes for scrutiny and validation by the workshop participants, highlighting some key concerns that had been identified, including:

- complicated, lengthy and bureaucratic registration processes;
- weak capacity in forest administration at the local level;
- communities' serious misunderstanding of fundamental objectives when implementing participatory forestry;
- poor sense of community spirit in cooperatives or associations with high inclination towards individualism, which is one of many sources of conflict;
- weak organizational capacity with communities demonstrating low technical and financial know-how in managing forest resources;
- communities' lack of capacity in contract negotiation skills and /or execution of contractual specifications with logging operators, one of many sources of conflict;

- communities' focus on timber exploitation to the detriment of exploiting non-timber forest products; and
- a rise in human-wildlife conflicts, with increased competition between humans and animals over forest resources and the destruction of agricultural plots and tree nurseries.

This important sharing of experiences and the ensuing discussions led to agreement on clear recommendations of action to be addressed the Ministry and forest administration in the short – six months– and medium – 24 months– term with regard to:

- support in the formulation of conducive regulatory frameworks and the suspension of industrial-scale exploitation of timber;
- support in the formulation of guidelines and norms to enable regulatory texts to be operationalized in order to facilitate artisanal production and the sale of timber; and
- Strengthening the capacity of the Gabonese forest institutions, including the elaboration of a clear, new strategy for community-based forestry.

Next steps

The [Paris Agreement](#) and the [Sustainable Development Goals](#) (SDG), particularly [SDG 15](#) explicitly recognize the importance of forests in action on climate change and in fostering sustainable development. Together with FAO, the Gabonese Government will aim to develop a strategy on participatory forestry to help grow inclusive value chains, thereby supporting sustainable economic growth and increasing opportunities for local employment and income generation.

For more information visit the:

- [Partenariat pour les forêts du Bassin du Congo website](#) to read the Libreville validation workshop's final communique and the accompanying press release (in French)
- [FAO Gabon press release](#)
- [FAO Forestry website](#) to find out more about FAO's work in community-based forestry, including key FAO publications:
 - FAO Forestry Paper "Forty years of community-based forestry: a review of its extent and effectiveness" available in [English](#) and [Spanish](#).

For more information on the technical aspects of the Libreville validation workshop and the assessment framework, please contact:

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