

Harmonization of forest policies and programmes in Central Africa

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The Convergence Plan of the Central African Forests Commission (COMIFAC) provides a framework for harmonizing forest policies and programmes and serves as a basis for the formulation of national forest programmes.

The development of harmonized forest policies and programmes for managing forest ecosystems and conserving their biodiversity is an enduring concern of the international community and national governments.

This is the context of various initiatives seeking to develop criteria, principles, standards and technical parameters for forest management, such as the Forest Principles adopted at the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED), sustainable forest management guidelines, and international agreements and conventions related to forests. The same concern is seen in the deliberations of the international forest dialogue over the past ten years with a view to setting up a legal instrument concerning forest management at the global level.

In Central Africa, the harmonization of forest policies is the common denominator in the objectives of every subregional cooperation initiative concerning the forest sector. This is perhaps inevitable for countries sharing the same forest ecosystems and desiring to pool their efforts to ensure their sustainable management. Areas where the countries of the subregion (see Map) have similar institutional needs for improvement include:

- involvement of rural populations and other stakeholders in the planning and management of forest resources and their use;
- linking forest development programmes with programmes for socio-economic development in general or rural development in particular;
- promotion and industrialization of forest products;

- promotion of networks and fora for technical and scientific exchange;
- sustainable financial mechanisms for forestry development;
- national forest inventories and collection of forest data;
- forestry education and research.

Central African States have a number of advantages that foster consistency in their forest management efforts. For example:

- Political will concerning the need to harmonize forest policies has been revitalized and consolidated in two summits of Heads of State, in Yaoundé, Cameroon in 1999 and Brazzaville, Congo in 2005. During the Brazzaville summit, all the participating Heads of State signed a legally binding treaty on forest conservation and forest sustainable management in Central Africa.
- There is a convergence of viewpoints and efforts regarding forests among Central African countries and their main forest partners, who have grouped together for concerted action in the Congo Basin Forest Partnership.
- On the basis of their shared features and their long experience in cooperation, especially in forestry planning, Central African countries are involved in a process of regional economic integration through the Economic and Monetary Community of Central Africa (EMCCA), which has made forests a focus.
- Central African countries are signatories of almost all international agreements and conventions concerning forests and the environment.

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- Forest reforms carried out by Central African countries over the past ten years have many similarities, especially in institutional and regulatory terms.
- The African Timber Organization (ATO) principles, criteria and indicators for the sustainable forest management of African natural tropical forests, developed with the support of the International Tropical Timber Organization (ITTO), provide an important basis for aligning forest management practices.
- The subregion has had experience in applying common rules to biodiversity conservation through the recent establishment of joint management of transboundary protected areas.

The Heads of State of Central Africa have moved harmonization of forest policies to centre stage by making it the priority thrust of the Convergence Plan approved at their second summit in Brazzaville, Congo. It is believed that consistency in sustainable forest management will foster flexibility in implementation of the Convergence Plan. However, differences in the tools for forest development and management hamper the development of synergies among these countries.

HARMONIZING POLICIES

Policy harmonization is a progressive process in which the stakeholders first identify and prioritize a certain number of common concerns, and then agree on ways, means and necessary stages for resolving them.

It is thus not necessarily a question of homogenization or uniformity, but rather of a comparative approach aimed at identifying divergent aspects and targeting those areas where it is possible to make progressive adjustments in order to refine forest management tools and instruments. Acquired experience and the specific nature of the various ecosystems must be taken into account. The process must culminate in guidelines for achieving consistency,

COMIFAC member countries



which can be supported in various ways with institutional arrangements, legislation, targeted action programmes, etc.

The procedure must be dynamic and flexible in order to encompass any possible modification needed in view of the different situations that may arise and experience gained.

Ownership of the process by the stakeholders and regular monitoring and verification of the results are indispensable. Similarly, a technical body at the subregional level is required to ensure monitoring and arbitration.

CONVERGENCE PLAN

At the end of their first summit on forests in Yaoundé in 1999, the Heads of State of Central Africa issued a joint statement, the Yaoundé Declaration, making a commitment to unite their efforts to ensure conservation and sustainable management of their forest ecosystems, which constitute the second largest tropical forest bloc on the planet (the Congo Basin forests).

The 12 resolutions contained in the

Yaoundé Declaration deal with almost all aspects of modern forestry, and the Heads of State have set themselves an ambitious goal of bringing the subregion's forests irrevocably under sustainable management.

An especially innovative element of the Yaoundé Declaration was the introduction of joint management of transboundary protected areas. The importance of this step lies in the fact that it represents the first example of joint community management of forest areas by different countries. Collective management of transboundary areas is also a strategy for combating the extraction of and illegal trade in forest products and ensuring the security of borders, and could thus contribute to maintaining peace.

Following this initiative, the first challenge facing the ministers responsible for forests – and now in charge of follow-up – was to translate the resolutions of the Heads of State into practice by putting in place various legislative and institutional arrangements and the planning necessary for this purpose. It was particularly

FAO – assisting forest policy coordination of COMIFAC countries

In March 2003, following a request from the Executive Secretariat of COMIFAC, FAO initiated a project to provide financial and technical support for updating and operationalizing the COMIFAC Convergence Plan. In this way FAO was also responding positively to General Assembly Resolution 54/214 of December 1999, which called on the international community to support the countries of the Yaoundé process in their forest development efforts.

In addition to project assistance directly aimed at support to COMIFAC and the Convergence Plan, FAO on its own or with partners assists COMIFAC countries in implementing a number of activities related to the strategic thrusts of the Convergence Plan. Through country projects, for example, FAO supports agroforestry and peri-urban plantations for fuelwood and construction wood in Burundi; participatory management and conservation of mangrove biodiversity in Cameroon; the formulation of a national strategy for urban and peri-urban forestry in Bangui, Central African Republic; and community forestry in the Democratic Republic of the Congo. Subregional projects include support to the Central Africa World Heritage Forest Initiative and enhancing food security through non-wood forest products in Central Africa. Within the framework of its support strategy in the Congo Basin, the forestry component of the FAO/Netherlands Partnership Programme (FNPP) supports the harmonization of forest policies, legislation, institutions and monitoring systems of the participating countries.

The opening of a new FAO Subregional Office for Central Africa in Libreville, Gabon in October 2006 will facilitate FAO's efforts in the subregion.

important to establish a consensus (using a participatory approach) on an action programme encompassing all the initiatives under way and involving all the stakeholders in its implementation.

The approach adopted by the experts was to develop and put in place a set of actions to serve as a reference point for defining the interventions of the various partners. The term "Convergence Plan" was therefore adopted as a title for this planning document, which would express the shared view of the countries involved in forest planning.

The first version of the Convergence Plan was drawn up in October 1999 and then approved in December 2000 by the first session of the Conference of Ministers in Charge of Forests in Central Africa (COMIFAC, now called the Central African Forests Commission). The participating countries have adopted it as a framework document in developing their own national components.

The plan was updated in 2003 with support from FAO (see Box). The last version of the plan was approved successively by the Conference of Ministers (May 2004), all the stakeholders in the Congo Basin Forest Partnership (June 2004) and finally the summit of Heads of State in Brazzaville (February 2005).

The ten-year cost of implementing the plan has been estimated at around US\$1.5 billion, and priorities were set in a three-year action plan (2004–2006).

The Convergence Plan is thus the outcome of an iterative planning exercise and acknowledged by all the partners and stakeholders as a good framework for forest activities and programmes in the Central African region, in line with the Yaoundé Declaration. It has the added value of:

- channelling forest management efforts towards sustainable development;
- familiarizing the countries con-

cerned with community forest management;

- serving as a basis for the formulation of national forest programmes.

Structure

The basic framework of the Convergence Plan consists of ten strategic thrusts, which express the operational orientation of the Yaoundé Declaration resolutions. The ten thrusts are articulated in a set of tools, measures and actions to be put in place at the regional and subregional levels.

The Convergence Plan has two sets of components: cross-cutting actions to be carried out by all the participating countries, and devolved actions to be implemented by each country individually. The countries are thus the crucible for implementation of the Yaoundé Declaration.

The three-year operational plan lists the necessary parameters for implementing each action: the goal, anticipated results, stages, activities to be carried out, indicators to verify progress, means of implementation, stakeholders involved, etc. There is also a system for monitoring implementation of the plan, and an evaluation is presented at each COMIFAC Ordinary Council meeting.

COMIFAC'S APPROACH TO HARMONIZING FOREST POLICIES AND MONITORING SYSTEMS

Since June 2005 COMIFAC has been engaged in harmonizing forest policies and monitoring and evaluation systems, with support from FAO (see Box). This process consists of developing a number of normative and legal instruments to ensure subregional consistency in forest management. The anticipated results of this process are:

- harmonized forest policies, institutions, legislation, taxation systems, norms, standards, etc.
- adoption and implementation of a subregional convention on forest monitoring and combating illegal

activities including poaching, especially in border areas;

- establishment of a system to gather, process and share forest-related information;
- adoption of a strategy to involve local people and NGOs in forest management.

The approach adopted by COMIFAC entails six essential stages.

- **Stage 1: Evaluation of the forest sector for each country.** National reports identify the strengths and weaknesses of the management system and recommend adjustments to be made at the national level. They evaluate two facets: first, forest policies; second, monitoring and evaluation of forestry activities, efforts to combat illegal activities and poaching, forest statistics and involvement of stakeholders in forest management.
- **Stage 2: National consensus.** All the national forest planning stakeholders consolidate and validate the national report in a national forum. The participants must agree on the modifications needed to ensure that national forest management instruments are sufficiently solid and stable for creating subregional cohesion. They must also pinpoint aspects suitable for subregional harmonization, and identify national-level problems that would benefit from subregional synergy for their solution.
- **Stage 3: Regional review.** A chart is drawn up of all countries' proposals, and the various ways, means and approaches needed to harmonize forest management instruments. The national reports on the two themes, harmonization of forest policies and forest control, are synthesized in two regional reports and submitted to a regional forum attended by representatives of government, NGOs, the private sector, bilateral and multilateral cooperation agencies and civil society. These stakeholders agree

on the points to be harmonized and the appropriate steps, as well as on the various adjustments to be made at the national level.

- **Stage 4: Priority setting.** A COMIFAC policy body, the Ministerial Council, prioritizes and chooses the aspects that are to be addressed at the supranational level and also identifies an arbitration mechanism.
- **Stage 5: Formulation of a regional convention on forest control.** The convention will address illegal exploitation of forest resources, including illegal logging and poaching.
- **Stage 6: Formulation and implementation of an action programme.** This stage entails development of supports for harmonization—criteria, guidelines, standards, strategies, institutional arrangements, etc.—based on COMIFAC's priorities.

Achievements in policy harmonization

At present, four of the stages described above have been achieved. It is planned to complete the remaining two in 2007.

Activities concerning policy harmonization got under way in June 2005 with the formulation of national reports.

In October 2005, a subregional workshop including civil society participants evaluated the national reports and recommended adjustments with a view to their finalization in national fora. Participants were asked to identify the strengths and weaknesses of the draft reports concerning forest management instruments in order to formulate concrete recommendations.

A second subregional workshop to prepare for national fora, organized in February 2006 by FAO's project for assistance to COMIFAC with support from the German Agency for Technical Cooperation (GTZ), capitalized on the experiences of institutions for subregional integration in harmonizing policies and pinpointed key points of interest.

Building on the results obtained at

national fora, an Extraordinary Council of COMIFAC held in Libreville, Gabon in April 2006 recommended speeding up the regional review so that the subregional discussion could be held as soon as possible and an action programme be proposed at the following council meeting.

The subregional forum, held in Douala, Cameroon in September 2006, approved 17 foci of interest as well as relevant methodologies and operational approaches for developing harmonization supports. The recommendations from the subregional forum were adopted by an Extraordinary Council of COMIFAC in Malabo, Equatorial Guinea, on 28 November 2006.

CONCLUSION

With the two summits of Heads of State held 1999 and 2005, the adoption of the Convergence Plan by the main actors in the forest sector including the Congo Basin Forest Partnership, and the first steps in its implementation, the forest dialogue in Central Africa is off to a good start. It is too soon to evaluate what effect this process will have on forests and those who depend on them. But the important point at this stage is that the process for working towards sustainable forest management is in place and has been politically accepted by the forestry leaders of all countries in the subregion. The collaborative efforts of the countries to harmonize their forest policies and their implementation through aligned national forest programmes will surely pave the way for improved forest management. ♦