

Coordinating forest sector development in Central Africa

J.P. Koyo

Numerous regional initiatives demonstrate the political will to reverse deforestation in Central Africa, but success on the ground will also depend on improved socio-economic conditions and better policy coordination between forestry and other sectors.

The forests of Central Africa constitute the second largest rain forest complex in the world after that of the Amazon. These forests have always been a source of varied resources, services and primary materials for their populations, providing timber, wood energy, bushmeat, fish and other foods, medicinal plants and other diverse wood and non-wood products.

Annual deforestation in ten Central African countries was of the order of 0.4 percent between 1990 and 2000 (FAO, 2001) (see Table). Deforestation and degradation of forest resources result from shifting cultivation and uncontrolled exploitation to satisfy the needs of both the local populations and the market for primary materials. Efforts to ensure the regeneration and conservation of these resources are ineffective in the context of poor governance and persistent poverty.

Faced with this situation, the countries of Central Africa and the international community have been undertaking initiatives to reverse these tendencies and ensure sustainable forest management.

The African Timber Organization (ATO) was created almost 30 years ago to harmonize the policies of the member countries in regard to national timber trade and sustainable forest management. Other initiatives include the Conference on Central African Moist Forest Ecosystems (CEFDHAC), launched in May 1996 to facilitate cooperation and exchange of experiences and practices, and the summit of Heads of State in March 1999 which gave birth to the Yaoundé Process. Yet despite these efforts, the results obtained to date remain far from what is needed to curb deforestation and degradation of forest resources.

The political will currently demonstrated by the countries of the subregion in initiatives such as the Yaoundé Process and CEFDHAC shows how positive lessons can be drawn from the problems of the past. These initiatives have recently been joined by the important Congo Basin Forest Partnership, which is being set up with the support of the United States, France, the European Union and others.

Central African forests have always been a source of varied resources, services and primary materials for their populations (honey from a Congo forest)



Jean Prosper Koyo is Chief of the Forest Conservation Service, FAO Forestry Department, Rome.

FAO/19168/M. MARZOTI

Forest cover in Central Africa

Country	Forest area ('000 ha)		Annual forest cover change, 1990–2000		% forest cover, 2000
	1990	2000	'000 ha	%	
Burundi	241	94	-15	-9.0	3.7
Cameroon	26 076	23 858	-222	-0.9	51.3
Central African Republic	23 207	22 907	-30	-0.1	36.8
Chad	13 509	12 692	-82	-0.6	10.1
Congo	22 235	22 060	-17	-0.1	64.6
Democratic Republic of the Congo	140 531	135 207	-532	-0.4	59.6
Equatorial Guinea	1 858	1 752	-11	-0.6	62.5
Gabon	21 927	21 826	-10	n.s.	84.7
Rwanda	457	307	-15	-3.9	12.4
Sao Tome and Principe	27	27	n.s.	n.s.	28.3
Total	250 068	240 730	-934	-0.4	45.5

Source: FAO, 2001.
n.s. = not significant.

SITUATION IN THE CONGO BASIN

Ecological context

Crossed by the Equator, the forests of Central Africa cover about 240.7 million hectares (FAO, 2001). They are heterogeneous and rich in endemic plant and animal species.

The area of planted forests in the sub-region is insignificant, totalling only about 648 000 ha, or less than 0.3 percent of the total forest area (FAO, 2001). Plantations are mostly based on exotic fast-growing species such as *Eucalyptus* spp. and tropical *Pinus* spp.

Between 1990 and 2000 forest cover dropped from 250.1 to 240.7 million hectares – a loss of 9.3 million hectares in ten years (FAO, 2001). Although the human population density is low in most Central African countries (with the exception of Burundi and Rwanda), deforestation has a particular impact on the more highly populated zones, i.e. urban and peri-urban areas and the vicinity of major roads.

A network of protected areas covers approximately 24 million hectares, or 10 percent of the region's total forested

area. It includes national parks, forest reserves, hunting reserves and biosphere reserves.

Policy context

Forest policies – which generally descend from those of the colonial administrations in which forests were defined as the exclusive property of the State – are poorly articulated in almost all Central African countries. As a result:

- forest-sector development is not integrated enough with national development in general and rural development in particular;
- rural populations, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), the private sector, etc. are not sufficiently involved in the conception, implementation and evaluation of forest policies;
- education not only cuts off future forestry staff from their natural environment, but also produces highly specialized workers adept only in their own domain;
- scientific research is poorly adapted to national needs and poorly sup-

ported by the public sector, and often fails to take rural problems into account;

- public investment is strongly concentrated in and around the capital cities and economic centres, resulting in substantial population flux from the countryside to the cities;
- recurrent political instability has resulted in civil war in some countries and has aggravated poverty among local populations.

With the lack of effective policies, augmented by the effects of unsatisfactory governance and high debt burden, it is understandable why rural poverty is exacerbated, with deforestation and degradation of the natural environment as direct consequences.

Socio-economic context

The ten countries of Central Africa have a total population of about 100.5 million and a population density of 18 people per square kilometre (FAO, 2001). The economies of these countries depend almost entirely on the primary sector, in other words the extraction and export of unprocessed raw materials produced through agriculture, forestry and mining. Mean annual income is US\$677 per person (FAO, 2001). On average, the agricultural and forest sectors represent 23 percent of gross national product (GNP) and employ more than 58 percent of the economically active population.

Communication and transportation infrastructures are very weak in Central Africa. Of the subregion's total 220 000 km of roads, only 8 700 km are paved – truly a limiting factor for development. All, or nearly all, of the countries in Central Africa are deeply in debt and therefore constrained by structural adjustment programmes.

Traditional slash-and-burn shifting agriculture and harvesting for fuelwood are by far the main causes of forest loss.

Selective harvesting of roundwood for export, often with external investment, remains an essential economic activity. Estimates for annual production of roundwood and woodfuel in 2003 were 11.8 million and 95.9 million cubic metres, respectively (FAO, 2004a). Wood energy represents more than 88 percent of total wood production. It is also notable that almost 40 percent of the wood that is cut is abandoned in the forest; not more than 30 percent of the wood removed from forests is processed, with productivity of about 25 percent.

The tropical moist forests of the Congo Basin also provide a number of other resources that supply local and international markets – in particular bushmeat (a million tonnes per year) and numerous edible and medicinal non-wood forest products.

REGIONAL PARTNERSHIP EFFORTS AND FOREST DIALOGUE

In the past 20 years, Central African countries have implemented a number of subregional planning and management initiatives for their forest resources.

African Timber Organization (ATO)

Created in 1976, ATO brings together 13 countries including those of Central

Africa. Its objectives concern in particular the harmonization of national policies regarding forest conservation, reforestation, forest management and related subjects. In recent years ATO has focused particularly on the definition of criteria and indicators for sustainable forest management and on the establishment of certification in Africa.

Conference on Central African Moist Forest Ecosystems (CEFDHAC)

Also known as the Brazzaville Process, CEFDHAC was created in the Congo in May 1996. Meeting every two years, it provides a framework for the coordination and exchange of experience among stakeholders in the forest sector (governments, the private sector, NGOs, etc.) on questions concerning the sustainable management of forest ecosystems in Central Africa. It has ten members (Burundi, Cameroon, Central African Republic, Chad, Congo, Democratic Republic of the Congo, Equatorial Guinea, Gabon, Rwanda and Sao Tome and Principe).

Yaoundé Process

A summit of seven African Heads of State was held in Yaoundé, Cameroon

in March 1999 to discuss problems related to the conservation and sustainable management of forest resources in the Congo Basin, particularly the creation of cross-boundary protected areas. At the conclusion of this summit, the Yaoundé Declaration was signed and the Conference of Ministers in Charge of Forests in Central Africa (COMIFAC) was created. Participants made a commitment to integrate forest programmes with those of other sectors, especially transportation and agriculture.

COMIFAC is currently considered an umbrella under which other subregional projects, networks and organizations such as CEFDHAC are associated. With the support of FAO, it has elaborated and adopted a Convergence Plan (COMIFAC, 2002) which defines strategies for countries and development partners in Central Africa. The Convergence Plan is now the major plan for the activities of the governments and national and subregional organizations in the Congo Basin area. Today the Yaoundé Process has an Executive Secretariat in Yaoundé and counts seven member countries: Cameroon, Central African Republic, Chad, Congo, Democratic Republic of the Congo, Equatorial Guinea and Gabon.

Shifting cultivation and harvesting for fuelwood are the main causes of forest loss in the region (wood harvested for fuel in Rwanda)



FAO/764/SIG/DJ/ANA

Congo Basin Partnership

Launched at the World Summit on Sustainable Development, held in September 2002 in Johannesburg, South Africa, the Congo Basin Partnership is an association of 29 governmental and non-governmental organizations working to improve communications and coordination of programmes, projects and policies with a view towards sustainable management of forest ecosystems in the six countries of the Congo Basin (Cameroon, Central African Republic, Congo, Democratic Republic of the Congo, Equatorial Guinea and Gabon). The partnership's activities are organized within the framework of the COMIFAC Convergence Plan.

Other programmes and networks

Other regional programmes and networks include the Programme for Conservation and Rational Utilization of Forest Ecosystems in Central Africa (ECOFAC), founded by the European Union in 1987; RIFFEAC (Réseau des institutions de formation forestière et environnemental d'Afrique centrale), a network of forestry and environmental training institutions founded by CEFDHAC in 2001; and the Regional Environmental Information Project (REIMP), created initially by the World Bank, which promotes cooperation in the production, exchange, dissemination and use of environmental information among the six Congo Basin countries.

FAO activities in the region

FAO has long provided support to forestry in Central Africa at both the national and regional levels, notably in forest inventory, sustainable management practices and training.

The Organization has recently elaborated a strategy for current and future assistance in the six countries of the Congo Basin, in line with the COMIFAC

Convergence Plan and taking care to create conditions for synergy and complementarity with the other agencies and donors working in the region (FAO, 2004b). The strategy is organized around four strategic orientations:

- helping to develop and implement techniques for forest management, harvesting and wood processing in the context of sustainable development;
- supporting the establishment and maintenance of a subregional forest information system that contains individual country data;
- providing support to strengthen management capacity and sustainable use of forest resources;
- providing support to strengthen institutional, political and legal frameworks with a view to better manage forest resources and equitably distribute the revenues they generate.

PROGRESS AND LESSONS LEARNED

The creation of several regional organizations such as CEFDHAC, COMIFAC and REIMP and the proliferation of NGOs and associations working on forestry matters in Central Africa are evidence of a raised awareness of environmental and forest management problems since the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development in 1992. Nevertheless, the concrete results on the ground still remain below expectations. In effect, the conferences and summits of Central African Heads of State have not yet resulted in a significant decrease in deforestation or degradation of Central African forests.

Insufficient coordination between forest policies and the policies of other sectors (e.g. agriculture, energy, industry, public works and education) is undoubtedly one of the main reasons for this situation. Another is the inadequate dialogue among stakeholders,

with failure to involve NGOs, civil society and local government in strategic decisions influencing the sustainable development of the forest sector. Participatory approaches to involve local communities and other development partners in identifying, formulating, implementing and evaluating projects are mostly lacking, and the institutions and personnel that would be expected to implement these approaches are not correctly prepared for the task. In general, institutional structures are lacking to translate the recommendations and resolutions of international and regional discussions into action at the national and local levels. Low levels of rural socio-economic development and inadequate forest resource management practices are aggravating factors.

Some might think that the proliferation of regional organizations in the not-very-favourable economic and financial context of Central African countries is ill advised. However, it is necessary to consider that one of the two principal organizations today is an intergovernmental organization (COMIFAC) while the other is a discussion forum (CEFDHAC). Many others (REIMP, the Organization for the Conservation of African Wildlife, etc.) are highly specialized. The Central African forests and their problems are not only very extensive, but also complex and diverse – thus the need for specialized approaches.

The new dynamic ushered in with the creation of COMIFAC, which serves as an umbrella for the other subregional organizations, and the adoption of the Convergence Plan seem to confirm the existence of political will. An agreement signed by Cameroon, the Congo and the Central African Republic on the management of transboundary protected areas is witness to this encouraging development.

It is clear that it will be extremely



FAO/ID130/M. MARZOT

The real solution to deforestation rests on improved living conditions for the people of Central Africa

difficult to bridge the gap between the progress realized in terms of international and regional dialogue and elaboration of concepts and practices, and the high rates of deforestation and forest degradation in Central Africa, where people's livelihoods continue to depend on forest resources. The real solution to deforestation will undoubtedly be found in the improvement of the living conditions of human populations. ♦



Bibliography

- Conference of Ministers in Charge of Forests in Central Africa (COMIFAC).** 2002. *Convergence Plan for the Conservation and Sustainable Management of Forest Ecosystems in Central Africa*. Yaoundé, Cameroon.
- FAO.** 2001. *Global Forest Resource Assessment 2000 – main report*. FAO Forestry Paper No. 140. Rome.
- FAO.** 2004a. *FAOSTAT forestry data*. Available at: faostat.external.fao.org/faostat/collections?subset=forestry
- FAO.** 2004b. *Forests in the Congo Basin: an FAO action strategy – November 2004*. Rome. ♦