

AGREEMENTS: FORESTRY PRINCIPLES: FOCUS ON THE CONGO BASIN RAINFORESTS

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Summary

The Congo Basin rainforests and surrounding drier woodlands are currently undergoing accelerated deforestation and degradation due to human pressure. The deforestation rate for Central Africa is estimated at about 0.6% per year. Loss and degradation of forest cover on this scale imposes serious risks of loss of biological diversity and emission in the atmosphere of carbon dioxide, previously locked-up in biomass. On the local level, forest loss is dramatic for the millions of inhabitants who depend on forest resources. This paper aims to explore the trends concerning forest policies and perceptions in the Congo Basin, especially since UNCED 1992: the increase of donor financed activities for conservation and improved forest management, the increase of collaboration at the regional level, the development of new forest policies and legislation at the national level. Some important changes of perception are happening, particularly amongst governments, towards issues such as forest quality, forest functions and the role of local people in forest areas. In this context it is slowly recognized that the balance between society and forest resources can only be sustained with the active involvement of the local communities who live in and around the forests.

Although these developments have created major changes in attitude, in most cases they have yet to be translated into conservation and sustainable management in the forests themselves. This paper summarizes the main constraints for implementing sustainability principles in concrete actions in the field. In this politically and economically unstable environment the reverse of the deforestation trend will be an enormous challenge. Suggested responses and necessary conditions for conservation and sustainable management are outlined.

1. Introduction

1.1 Human Pressure Leads to Accelerated Deforestation

Forests are currently facing greater threats than at any time in history. Particularly the humid tropics are undergoing accelerated deforestation as a result of human pressure. According to FAO (1997), tropical deforestation runs at 12,9 million hectares (i.e. 0.74 percent) per year over the 1990–95 periods. The six countries of Central Africa—Cameroon, Central African Republic, Democratic Republic of Congo, Equatorial Guinea, Gabon, and Republic of Congo—contain the largest remaining contiguous expanse of moist tropical forest in Africa and the second largest in the world, after that of Amazonia. This African rainforests are covering the Congo River watershed or “Congo Basin,” a vast depression in the African continent. Unfortunately, like the tropical forests of South America and Asia, the deforestation rates of the Congo Basin rainforests and surrounding drier woodlands are increasing. Unsustainable timber harvesting, shifting cultivation, urban expansion and other activities are posing increasing threats to this globally significant tropical forest resource. With approximately some 200 million hectares of forest left, not more than 60% of the original forest cover remains today. FAO (1997) estimates the deforestation rate for Central Africa at about 0.6% per year. Loss of forest cover on this scale imposes serious risks of loss of biological diversity, and emission into the atmosphere of carbon dioxide

previously locked-up in biomass. On the local level, forest loss is dramatic for the millions of inhabitants who depend on forest resources.

1.2 Multiplication of Political Responses

In recent times there has been increasing concern about the rapid rate of deforestation and forest degradation in developing countries. Largely as a result of NGO action and public pressure, there has been a range of official attempts to address these problems. The movement gained momentum in 1980 with the publication of the World Conservation Strategy and the 1987 report of the Commission on Environment and Development, *Our Common Future*, often referred to as the “Brundtland Report”. The forestry debate came into sharper focus during the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED) held in Rio de Janeiro in June 1992. Forest loss was one of the key issues addressed by the delegates at the Earth Summit. The “Forest Principles” although non-binding are the first global consensus on forest policy. Also, Chapter 11 “Combating Deforestation” of Agenda 21, the action plan developed at Rio, addresses specific forest issues. These documents embrace the concept of sustainable management of the world’s forests to meet current needs without compromising the ability of present and future generations to meet their own needs.

The debates on forestry were not always without tension, particularly because of the diversity of interests both in developing and developed countries relating to forestry issues such as timber production and consumption, international timber trade and the valuation of forest for purposes of protecting soils, watersheds and biological diversity. Despite the prevailed North-South polarization concerning forests during the Earth Summit, the “post-Rio” years has been a period of intense activity on forests at different policy levels all over the world. Global efforts to define and put into practice “sustainable forest management”—including consideration of ecological, social, and economic factors—have intensified.

The Rio conference has also contributed to an increase in attention for the conservation and sustainable use of the rainforest ecosystems in Africa. Dozens of processes, groups, panels and North-South partnerships have been established. Although the debate on sustainable forest management is quite young in the Central African region, the different governments particularly recognize the need for it.

1.3 Results in the Field are not Forthcoming

But up to now all those principles and the many positive steps could not reverse the trend of forest degradation and deforestation in the region. The last primary forests are increasingly under human pressure. For the moment, sustainable forest management in the field only exists in a limited number of cases. So far it’s clear that there is a considerable gap between what is presented in the UNCED documents and in their implementation.

Although in many cases governments are showing their will to change, there is a general shortage of linkages between the national and regional policy processes and the realities in the field. There is a growing understanding that the issue of forest

conservation and management is too wide and complex to be left for only governments and NGOs to succeed in stopping degradation and loss. The balance between society and forest resources can be sustained only with the active involvement of the local communities who live in and around the forests. In this context, the role rural communities may play in the forest management is little by little recognized. On the other hand, trading relationships and European colonial governments have created political structures, which deny traditional people's rights to their land and resources and so undermine attempts at conservation and sustainable management of the forests.

This paper sets out to explore the trends concerning the forest policies and perceptions in the Congo Basin since UNCED and the handicaps for implementing sustainability principles. Suggested responses and conditions necessary for conservation, and sustainable management are outlined.

2. The Genesis of Sustainable Forest Management Agreements

2.1 UNCED, Agenda 21, and the Forest Principles

The United Nations Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED) met in Rio de Janeiro in June 1992, with the intention of launching a new global approach to environment and development.

A number of "Agreements" (principles), "Statements" and "Conventions" related to the environment were negotiated at UNCED, which are relevant to the African rainforests. These include:

- "Agenda 21" (*The Program of Action for Sustainable Development for Now Into the Twenty-first Century*): this action program offers specific needs relating to forestry, in particular Chapter 11 entitled *Combating Deforestation*. Issues are conservation of biological diversity, combating deforestation, integrated approach to the planning and management of land resources, etc. In Section 11.22 (b), governments agree to pursue, in cooperation with special interest groups and international organizations, "the formulation of scientifically sound criteria and guidelines for the management, conservation and sustainable development of all forest types".
- "The Forest Principles" (*The Non Legally Binding Authoritative Statement of Principles for a Global Agreement on the Management, Conservation and Sustainable Development of All Types of Forest*): The main emphasis of the Forest Principles is for governments to manage forest land on a sustainable basis to meet the social, economic, ecological, cultural and spiritual needs of present and future generations. The principles are launched to provide a comprehensive platform for addressing issues such as deforestation.
- "The Convention on Bio-diversity Conservation": this United Nations Convention is developed to insure effective mechanisms to halt the destruction of biological species, habitats and ecosystems.
- "The Framework Convention on Climate Change": This Framework Convention has the goal to achieve stabilization of greenhouse gas concentrations in the atmosphere at a level that would prevent human-caused disturbances of the

global climate system. The tracking of changes in vegetation cover is implied in this Convention.

The statements in the various Conventions are binding to the nations that signed them. The Convention on Biological Diversity has been signed and ratified by most African countries, as well as those of the Congo Basin. Also, the Framework Convention on Climate Change has been signed and ratified by most African countries, although in the Congo Basin, R.P. Congo (Congo Brazaville) and Equatorial Guinea are exceptions.

The proposal for a Global Forest Convention was rejected. So a binding “Forest Convention,” along the lines of those for bio-diversity or ozone layer protection is lacking.

2.2 Developments in International Conventions and Agreements

The Intergovernmental Panel/Forum on Forests (IPF/IFF)

UNCED led to the establishment, in April 1995, of the Intergovernmental Panel on Forests (IPF) by the United Nations Commission on Sustainable Development (CSD). IPF was set up for a two-year period and tasked with following up the initiatives started at UNCED and encouraging international consensus and coordinated proposals for action to support the management, conservation and sustainable development of all types of forests. The work of the IPF, together with that of international organizations, national governments, non-governmental organizations and the private sector, represents an unprecedented level of international forestry activity. By the time IPF completed its work in 1997, it had developed approximately 140 proposals for action on issues related to sustainable forest management including national programs, forest assessment criteria and indicators, traditional forest-related knowledge, and underlying causes of deforestation.

However, various matters were left pending and the UNGASS, the UN General Assembly, at his nineteenth special session in June 1997, decided to continue the intergovernmental policy dialogue on forests through the establishment of an ad hoc open-ended Intergovernmental Forum on Forests (IFF) under the aegis of the CSD. IFF will submit its final report to the 8th session of CSD in 2000.

Since the establishment of IFF a number of meetings addressing areas of the IFF work program were held. The Experts Meeting of the Costa Rica-Canada Initiative on International Arrangements and Mechanisms (San José 22–26 February 1999) was the first of three stages of the Initiative, which aims to identify possible elements and work towards consensus on the usefulness of having international arrangements and mechanisms; for example, a legally-binding instrument on all types of forests.

The Kyoto Protocol of the Framework Convention on Climate Change

In December 1997, 159 countries signed the Kyoto Protocol to the Framework Convention on Climate Change (FCCC). Developed countries and those in transition to

a market economy committed themselves to targets for limiting their emissions of Green House Gasses (GHGs), but developing countries did not.

The Kyoto Protocol makes explicit reference to land use change and forestry under several of its articles. It has in particular recognized the significant role of forests in mitigating global climate change. Under the Protocol, a limited list of activities in the land use change and forestry sector can be used to meet the national emissions commitments. Credit towards meeting national commitments can also be given for investment in other countries. Developed countries may invest in developing countries through the Clean Development Mechanism (CDM). Although the extent to which CDM will include land use change and forestry activities is not yet clear, the possibilities for forestry investment appear promising. Should the decision be taken to include land use change and forestry activities under CDM, developed countries should have continued motivation to invest in projects reducing emissions from deforestation and enhance carbon sequestration.

In November 1998 in Buenos Aires, parties agreed on the Buenos Aires Plan of Action. This contained a work program and firm deadlines for addressing the Kyoto mechanisms, finance and technology transfer, mitigation of adverse effects arising from implementation of the FCCC and the Protocol, and the pilot phase of Activities Implemented Jointly (AIJ). Other critical elements in the FCCC and the Protocol, such as adaptation and land use change and forestry (LUCF), will also be debated extensively over the next two or three years.

By request of the FCCC Subsidiary Body for Scientific and Technical Advice (SBSTA) at its 8th session (June 1998), the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) will produce by June 2000 a special report on carbon emissions from sources and removals by sinks from land use, land use change and forestry, to help clarify the implications of the Kyoto Protocol for land use sectors, including the forest sector (FAO 1999).

The International Tropical Timber Agreement (ITTA)

The International Tropical Timber Agreement (ITTA) was signed in 1985, and led to the establishment of ITTO in 1986, to help research, promote and coordinate trade in tropical timber.

When the ITTA was renegotiated in 1994, NGOs and some tropical country governments suggested expanding the scope of the agreement to include temperate and boreal timber as well. However, this was strongly resisted by Northern countries, which almost brought the whole renegotiation process to a halt. (WWF/IUCN 1996).

28 producer countries, 25 consumer countries and the European Union, giving the International Tropical Timber Organization (ITTO) a total membership of 54, have signed ITTA 1994, which came into force on 1 January 1997. Most of the African ITTA members are Congo Basin countries: Cameroon, CAR, DR Congo, Equatorial Guinea, and Gabon.

The current agreement has a greater focus on sustainable forest management than did the previous one (1985 to 1995). The central focus of ITTO's work now is the "Year 2000 Objective," under which all producer countries have made the commitment to have their exports of tropical timber products come from sustainably managed sources by the year 2000. Consumer member countries have also made a commitment to have their forests under sustainable management by 2000. (FAO 1999).

There are concerns that the Asian crisis could hamper producers' efforts to improve forest management practices, thus undermining attempts to achieve ITTO's Year 2000 Objective (FAO 1999).

The Tropical Forestry Action Plan

FAO established the Tropical Forestry Action Plan in 1985, with the UN Development Program (UNDP), the World Bank and the World Resource Institute (WRI). It aims at the introduction of improved management and use of forests. Unfortunately the aims have not been achieved and the TFAP has sometimes increased timber production from primary forests. For example in Cameroon, the TFAP in effect encouraged exploitation of the last 14 million hectares of pristine rainforests in the south and east. In 1990, WWF concluded that: "TFAP has failed to provide consistent guidance and leadership to national governments in developing plans for the rational management and conservation of their tropical forests. It has been unable to set priorities amongst countries and consequently has become overburdened. It has yet to demonstrate the capacity to oversee the implementation of national plans. It has been unable to effectively align all donor agencies in the forest sector under one common umbrella. It has failed to ensure widespread participation by representative groups within countries and it has failed to convince local groups and non-governmental organizations that it offers realistic solutions over the long-term." (FAO/IUCN 1996).

The different Central African countries have initiated National Forestry Action Plans (NFAP) and/or National Environmental Action Plans (NEAP). The planning process is at different levels of progress.

Countries with NFAP's and/of NEAPs are (FAO 1999):

	Starting date	Type
Cameroon	1986	NFAP
CAR	1990	NFAP
R. P. Congo	1987	NFAP/NEAP
D. R. Congo	1987	NFAP
Equatorial Guinea	1989	NFAP
Gabon	1994	NFAP

2.3 Criteria and Indicators for Sustainable Forest Management

The Development of Criteria and Indicators is among the Major Priorities

There is an increasing trend towards the management of forests as ecological systems with multiple economic benefits and environmental values, and with broad public participation in the decision-making process. This concept is generally termed “sustainable forest management”. It aims to ensure that the benefits—material and intangible—derived from the forests meet present needs, while at the same time ensuring their continued availability and contribution to long-term social and economic development.

Criteria and indicators for sustainable forest management are tools which can be used in the conceptualization, implementation, and monitoring of progress in nationwide, sustainable forest management in its broadest sense. Criteria define the key elements of sustainability against which forest management may be assessed. Each criterion may be characterized by one or more descriptive indicator/s. Collectively, criteria and indicators provide a common framework in the countries involved, and enable them to collect data to assess trends towards or away from achieving forest sustainability at the national (or regional/eco-regional) level, as was committed to at UNCED. Information on status and trends, which is available to decision-makers and the general public, can be used to strengthen policy and decision-making to further improve forest management practices over time.

At the third session of the UCD in April 1995, during which follow-up to UNCED in forestry was reviewed, the development of criteria and indicators was identified as being among the major tasks and priorities for the IPF. The CSD requested the IPF, in collaboration with national and international organizations and institutes, to catalyze the further development of internationally agreed criteria and indicators against which progress towards sustainable development of all types of forests could be measured and to encourage their implementation at national level.

Intergovernmental Initiatives for Criteria and Indicators

The first organization to develop guidelines for sustainable forest management (prior to UNCED) was the International Tropical Timber Organization (ITTO): “The ITTO Guidelines for the Sustainable Management of Natural Tropical Forests” (1989). Based on this, ITTO published criteria for monitoring sustainability in tropical moist forests in early 1992. They were supplemented in 1993 by guidelines for the establishment and sustainable management of planted tropical forests, and guidelines for conservation of biological diversity in tropical forests. The ITTO Guidelines and Criteria cover forests of ITTO producer countries in all tropical regions. They include all the Congo Basin countries except R. P. Congo.

During the years after the Earth Summit, key tropical timber producer nations proposed that the Agreement be broadened to include temperate and boreal timbers, so that all forest types would be treated equally. Various efforts are being made, so that guidelines now exist for all types of forests.

In this context the following intergovernmental initiatives have been launched: The Montreal Process (all non-European countries with temperate and boreal forests), the Helsinki Process (forests in Europe), the Tarapoto Proposal (the Amazon Forest), the Dry-Zone Africa Process (dry-zone forests in sub-Saharan countries), the Near East

Process (dry-zone forests in Near East countries) and the Central American Process (CCAD and Cuba).

Meanwhile ITTO, through an Expert Panel established in 1997 by ITTC, has revised its criteria for sustainable tropical forest management in line with recent trends and international developments in the field. ITTC finalized the draft document “Criteria and indicators for the measurement of sustainable management of natural tropical forests” in Libreville, Gabon in May 1998.

While the various initiatives differ somewhat in content and /or structure, they are similar in objectives and approach. They all incorporate, in some fashion, the following fundamental elements of criteria for sustainable forest management: extent of forest resources, biological diversity, forest health and vitality, productive functions of forests, protective functions of forests, socio-economic benefits and needs, and legal, policy and institutional framework. (FAO 1999).

In addition, various intergovernmental organizations, including the African Timber Organization (ATO), SADC, IGAD, the Organization of African States and the Economic Commission of West African States are making valuable efforts to develop criteria and indicators for the sustainable management of Africa’s tropical forests (FAO 1997).

ATO is a specialized intergovernmental organization, which offers a forum for coordination among member countries (Cameroon, R.P. Congo, CAR, Equatorial Guinea, Gabon amongst other countries of west moist Africa). Traditionally, the ATO deals with issues related to the production and commercialization of timber. Recently the organization has widened its scope to include sustainable forest management. With The Center for International Forestry Research (CIFOR), it has developed and field-tested a regional set of criteria and indicators for sustainable forest management.

Activities at the Forest Management Level in the Congo Basin

Once identified, criteria and indicators need to be tested at the field level. The relevance and the applicability in the context of conditions and needs of the member countries, has to be assessed and evaluated. Internationally coordinated initiatives in the testing of criteria and indicators have been complemented over the past years by a number of activities carried out by both government agencies and national and international non-governmental organizations.

CIFOR is coordinating a project (known as “Testing Criteria and Indicators for Sustainable Management of Forests”) which aims to identify criteria and indicators that can be considered objective, cost-effective and relevant in the assessment of the sustainability of prevailing forest management practices. It is elaborating field activities in Cameroon.

Another example of field implementation at the forest management unit level are the sustainable forest management demonstration areas established in producer countries of the ITTO, among which are Cameroon, R.P. Congo and Gabon.

ITTO, in collaboration with the International Institute for Environment and Development (IIED) and the World Conservation Monitoring Center (WCMC) has also developed the “Forest Resources Accounting System” to standardize monitoring of forest condition and management and to facilitate comparable reporting. The system is presently being tested in Cameroon.

ATO has supported the testing of his indicators at the forest management unit level in Cameroon, R. P. Congo, D. R. Congo, and Gabon.

While work has progressed rapidly on conceptualization, elaboration and testing of criteria and indicators for sustainable forest management at the regional and eco-regional levels, with adaptation at the national level, additional effort is needed in national—and sub-national—level implementation of the criteria and indicators (FAO 1999).

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Biographical Sketch

Ann Van Herzele has an academic background in forestry, Environmental Impact Assessment and human ecology. She has an extensive practical and research experience in the field of environmental policy and spatial planning. She currently holds a position of research at the Human Ecology Department of the Free University Brussels (VUB). Her present research concerns public involvement in planning for urban woodlands.