



OVERVIEW

IIED Natural Resources Group

Project name:

China-Africa Forest Governance Learning Platform (FGLP)

Project leader:

James Mayers

Time frame:

April 2012 – present

Objective:

To strengthen understanding, partnership and joint action on forest governance between China and Africa through sharing information, bringing knowledge from the field and developing stronger, deeper links among diverse stakeholders.

PROJECT SUMMARY

Since 2003, IIED has facilitated the Forest Governance Learning Group (FGLG), a group of teams in ten African and Asian countries. The seven African teams, concerned about the lack of evidence to confirm perceptions of growing Chinese investment in Africa's timber trade, approached IIED to facilitate increased information flow about forest governance, investment and trade between researchers and opinion leaders in China and Africa. Hosted by two of IIED's Chinese partners, the China-Africa Forest Governance Learning Platform was launched on 5–6 March 2013 in Beijing. The two-day event reviewed available evidence and perceptions, and identified an action plan with practical next steps.

CHANGE IN ACTION

The platform launch was a small, but significant step towards greater understanding of forest land use and timber trade links between China and Africa. It openly explored sensitive issues such as illegality and unsustainable practice in the timber trade, creating trust and political will to confront these challenges in a meaningful way. Delegates committed to pursuing a partnership that could research key issues, engage the private sector on key questions and improve forest governance.

Platform set for China-Africa forest governance action

A new partnership builds bridges between African and Chinese stakeholders to strengthen governance of forests

Although China imports only 4 per cent of its forest products from Africa, these sales (worth US\$1.3 billion, according to Chinese government statistics) are very significant for several African economies. Mozambique, for example, exports 90 per cent of its timber to China. Despite this increasing trade activity, IIED's African partners felt they lacked information about Chinese investments in their countries, especially in light of rumoured illegal and unsustainable activity. They also wanted better links with Chinese policymakers and opinion leaders in the forestry sector to ensure policy and investment decisions supported sustainable forest management and local livelihoods.

IIED brought these concerns to its Chinese partners through the Forest Governance Learning Group (FGLG), a group of teams active in ten African and Asian countries to strengthen forest governance. Encouraged by the positive response of the Chinese partners, FGLG proposed the China-Africa Forest Governance Learning Platform as a mechanism to build bridges between African and Chinese stakeholders in the forestry trade. To prepare for their first meeting, Chinese and African stakeholders developed reports on available evidence and perceptions of their trading relationships. Hosted by IIED's Chinese governmental and

non-governmental partners – the Chinese Academy of Forestry, the State Forest Administration and the Global Environmental Institute – the platform was launched in Beijing on 5–6 March 2013.

Small but significant steps

The Beijing event was a modest achievement in itself, bringing together for the first time high-level Chinese and African officials, as well as policymakers, researchers and experts on the forestry sector. Over two days, stakeholders explored sensitive issues such as illegal and unsustainable logging, creating trust and political will to confront these challenges in a meaningful way. The Chinese government, for example, presented guidelines to help Chinese companies take responsibility for their social and environmental conduct overseas, as well as to enhance the sustainability of China's overseas forest operations. On issues such as governance and land tenure, both African and Chinese delegates agreed they could learn from each other. They committed to pursuing research to fill knowledge gaps, and reporting on results at a second meeting to be held in Africa in 2014.

Since the March launch, several incidents of change have occurred. While the platform was intended to build bridges between bilateral trading

Since the launch, several changes have occurred. In May 2013, the Government of Mozambique together with non-governmental organisations organised a successful forum with Chinese companies involved in their country's timber trade to explore the challenges of forest governance. Chinese partners have also asked IIED to facilitate input from African stakeholders on draft guidelines for investment in the forest sector. And the UK's Department for International Development (DFID) has conditionally approved a substantial proposal developed by IIED, WWF and their African and Chinese partners to move the platform forward.

KEY LESSONS LEARNT & INNOVATIONS

- Forums designed to build trust and share knowledge between partners in different countries can also create or strengthen links within individual countries. Stronger partnerships within a country can, in turn, enhance bilateral relationships.
- Small steps are important. Voluntary guidelines, that may at first sight appear toothless, can be significant where there was previously no basis for dialogue, and can open the door to concrete action.

PARTNERS' VIEW

At the China-Africa Platform event I realised how we can work together to get a better grip of the forest sector. When I came back to Mozambique I started to work with some NGOs to organise a meeting of all the Chinese companies to go through laws and guidelines.

Renato Timana
National Directorate of Land and Forest,
Mozambique.



This research was funded by UK aid from the UK Government, however the views expressed do not necessarily reflect the views of the UK Government. The overall project in which these activities are implemented also receives funding from the European Union.



Photo: Simon Lim

The platform launch brought together high-level African and Chinese officials, policymakers, researchers and forestry experts.

partners, it also helped reinforce links within countries as well. The Mozambican governmental and non-governmental delegates, for example, turned over a new page in their relationship. In May 2013, building on their productive collaboration in Beijing, the Mozambican delegates organised a forum in their country with some 50 Chinese companies involved in bilateral timber trade. Using the two sets of Chinese guidelines presented in Beijing as a starting point, the meeting provoked a constructive dialogue among civil society, the private sector and government about forest governance in Mozambique.

Providing greater direction

Stimulated by the Platform, Chinese government authorities are preparing a third set of guidelines for Chinese companies that will focus on foreign investment in forest industries, a move that acknowledges the need to provide Chinese companies with more direction. While this move is positive in itself, it's even more significant that Chinese partners have also asked IIED to solicit advice from African stakeholders on the draft guidelines. In another political and cultural context, where businesses are more independent, the voluntary nature of the guidelines might discredit them. Given the links of Chinese businesses to government, however, the guidelines are considered to be extremely helpful.

Indeed, in another result stemming from the Beijing launch, IIED has received conditional approval from DFID for a new project that will include

monitoring the uptake and effect of voluntary guidelines in Cameroon, Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), Ghana, Mozambique and Uganda. This work, part of a larger plan to build on the Beijing launch, would also include developing evidence, capacity, policy and investment opportunities that can enhance sustainable forest product trade between China and Africa. In addition to furthering partnerships between IIED, China and Africa, the proposal would strengthen the alliance between IIED and WWF. In Cameroon and DRC, for example, the WWF-run Global Forests and Trade Network would help IIED work with Chinese-linked timber companies on promoting understanding of the laws and developing a system to monitor compliance.



Knowledge Products

The International Institute for Environment and Development (IIED) promotes sustainable development, linking local priorities to global challenges. We support some of the world's most vulnerable people to strengthen their voice in decision making.