Briefing

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Policy pointers

Inclusive community forestry requires consistent, coherent and clear legal frameworks that support local and indigenous communities' rights. Governments should develop and implement administrative and legal procedures that are just and accessible to communities.

Policies should strengthen forest governance at the community level. The focus should be on existing community structures or initiatives, and vulnerable and marginalised groups (women and indigenous populations) should be specifically involved in decision making.

Policymakers should uphold commitments to forest governance processes, such as the FLEGT Voluntary Partnership Agreements. The EU should support stronger implementation of the FLEGT Action Plan, emphasising forest protection and local community rights.

Civil society can facilitate a shared national vision for community forestry by enabling direct and effective representation of local communities in multistakeholder dialogues, and ensuring communities' rights are integrated into ongoing land and forestry legal reforms.

Why communities are key to protecting Congo Basin forests

Forests are better protected when managed by the local communities who depend on them. In the Congo Basin, community forestry has the potential to improve rural living conditions, help protect and sustainably manage natural resources (including trees) and contribute to climate objectives. But for this to happen, policymakers must ensure that community forestry laws secure customary land rights while empowering local communities to manage forests. This briefing describes how Fern and its partners engaged in the CoNGOs project to improve the livelihoods of forest-dependent communities in the Congo Basin through better forest governance and practice. The project has also influenced policies in the Congo Basin and in the EU (European Union). Dialogues on community forestry between governments, EU institutions, civil society organisations and communities have challenged negative perceptions about community forestry, demonstrating how it can help preserve tropical forests and strengthen livelihoods.[1]

Equitable livelihoods through forests

Millions of people depend on the forests of Central Africa's Congo Basin, and most are women.[2] At nearly 2 million square kilometres, the Congo Basin rainforest is the second largest in the world.[3] Its forests provide habitat, building materials, medicine, meat, wild fruits, vegetables and spices. They regulate the local climate and flow of water, play an important role in soil conservation and are home to thousands of endemic plant and animal species. These forests remain mostly intact compared to other tropical ecosystems. But deforestation is increasing, as demand grows for commodity crops, energy and timber. In the last two decades, nearly 18 million hectares of land in the Congo Basin have been acquired by large-scale landholders for palm oil, rubber and cocoa plantations.[4] This is having a critical impact on communities' access to land and forests. But these threats could be tackled through greater policy commitments to strengthen and support community forestry (Box 1).

Community forestry is one avenue through which civil society stakeholders in Cameroon, and more recently in the Central African Republic (CAR) and Republic of the Congo (RoC), have sought to support sustainable and accountable resource management and development. All countries in the Congo Basin region are involved in a Voluntary Partnership Agreement (VPA) process with the EU under its Forest Law Enforcement, Governance and Trade (FLEGT) Action Plan (Box 2). And Cameroon, CAR and RoC have all signed VPAs with the EU. These countries are also implementing national REDD+ (reducing emissions from deforestation and forest degradation) and nationally determined

contributions (NDCs) to meet their commitments to halt deforestation and climate change. Community-based forest management, including forest protection and restoration, is a common feature of national REDD+ strategies in the region. Both Cameroon and CAR have included community forestry in their NDCs.

An essential first step to good forest management is a clear and just legal framework, which incorporates the rights of local people

However, community forestry is still a relatively new 'bottom-up' approach in the region. And its reputation has been tainted by challenges in Cameroon,[5] a pioneer of community forestry in the region for the past 20 years.[6] Within this complex yet promising policy context, more political support for developing community forestry in the region is urgently needed, through research, establishing pilots and advocacy. The CoNGOs project provided an opportunity to build on earlier work to secure commitments to community forestry and sustainable livelihoods through the FLEGT VPA process, which offers critical policy space to debate solutions that benefit communities. It is a key lever for change in the region.

This briefing focuses on recent work as part of the DFID-funded CoNGOs project by Fern and its partners the Centre pour l'Environnement et le Développement (CED) in Cameroon, Centre pour l'Information Environnementale et le Développement Durable (CIEDD) in CAR, and Forum pour la Gouvernance et les Droits de l'Homme (FGDH) and Observatoire Congolais des Droits de l'Homme (OCDH) in RoC. It examines lessons learnt from the project, including factors that promote or hinder community forestry, with recommendations for ways forward.

Consolidating policies amid threats

Key priorities throughout the region are to tackle illegal logging and improve local people's control in deciding how forest resources are used and managed — not just for access and subsistence but also for broader community development and cash-income needs.

In Cameroon, CED, other consortium members and local civil society organisations used the project to demand a revision of the VPA legality grid (a summary overview of the country's legal requirements and evidence required to prove the legal origin of timber) for community forests.

In CAR, CIEDD and members of the Gestion Durable des Ressources Naturelles (GDRNE) platform, including consortium partners Rainforest Foundation UK (RFUK), Réseau des Populations Autochtones et Locales pour la gestion durable des écosystèmes forestiers de Centrafrique (REPALCA) and Well Grounded, collaborated to promote the rights of forest communities to access, monitor and manage forest resources. This includes through the VPA and REDD+ processes, and also by helping to shape and implement legislation related to community forestry.[7]

In RoC, Fern, FGDH and OCDH collaborated with consortium partners ClientEarth, Comptoir Juridique Junior, Forest Peoples Programme (FPP) and Organisation pour le Développement et les Droits Humains au Congo (ODDHC), as well as with local VPA and REDD+ platforms. Efforts focused on influencing community forestry-specific provisions in the draft of the new forest law and demanding stronger implementation of the VPA. The latter more specifically focuses on logging companies' compliance to create community-dedicated areas inside their forestry concessions and to support the creation of community forest pilots within them. However, although seen as important for improving community rights, these Areas for Community Development (Séries de Développement Communautaire or SDCs) are often too limited in size to constitute proper community forests. Nevertheless, they provide an opening to progress piloting within the current legal framework (which in RoC is yet to implement community forestry as a separate category of forest tenure).

Leveraging policy influence

An essential first step to good forest management is a clear and just legal framework, which incorporates the rights of local people and enables them to have a say in policy processes.

In Cameroon, through the Community and Forest Platform, CED and consortium partners developed an advocacy action plan proposing a review of the legal framework on community forestry so that it contributes to the NDCs. It

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Box 1. What is community forestry?

Community forestry can improve local livelihoods, reduce deforestation, improve forest quality and strengthen good governance through increased participation of local people. It can be defined as:

"A situation in which communities have the right to manage the forest resources they depend on, with a view to improving their living conditions. It refers to forest management by and from the point of view of communities […] Community forests should be understood as areas that facilitate a range of socio-economic and ecological activities, which, when considered together, constitute 'community forestry'."[13]

also built the technical and operational capacities of communities to manage their forests and diversify income-generating activities. Involving communities and indigenous groups in forest management is important to combat climate change and contribute to the NDCs. As a result of these joint efforts, a guide for how to develop a participatory simple management plan (SMP) was created. It helps communities engage in the SMP review process and reduces prohibitive costs associated with the revision of the SMP and hence community dependence on external support.[8] One community in Cameroon has successfully completed the review process of their SMP using the guide — providing important lessons for others to follow.

In RoC, the consortium worked with the Plateforme pour la Gestion Durable des Forêts (PGDF) to develop joint positions on a common vision for community forestry and, with inputs from the forest administration, a national roadmap for community forestry.[9] A principle demand was that logging companies uphold their social and environmental obligations and thus give back areas of land for community activities. As a result of civil society and government pressure, five additional companies in southern Congo will create dedicated community areas within their concessions where communities can carry out income-generating activities.

During the project, important community forest champions also emerged. For example, in RoC the Minister of Forest Economy, Rosalie Matondo, has become an ambassador for participatory forestry (including community forestry) for Central Africa. She promotes community rights and supports developing new community forestry models that give communities greater access to healthy, instead of degraded, forests.

Another success was the January 2019 agreement by the RoC Forestry Department to collaborate with FGDH and OCDH to create two community forests pilots of around 3,000ha (combined) in the northern Sangha Region. Simultaneous engagements with the REDD+, VPA and Publish What You Pay (PWYP) platforms included the organisation of local-level dialogues between local communities, civil society, government authorities and logging companies involved in VPA and REDD+ processes.[10] These were key to constructive interactions between the main stakeholders in the process and marginalised groups. It resulted in the inclusion of community rights in the draft letter of intent that RoC is in the process of

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Box 2. How Voluntary Partnership Agreements promote community forestry

Voluntary Partnership Agreements (VPAs) are part of the EU's Forest Law Enforcement, Governance and Trade Action Plan 5 and seek to ensure that timber and timber products exported to the EU come from legal sources. VPAs also aim to strengthen legality through ambitious governance reforms including strengthening forest dwellers' rights and participation in forest governance.[14] Donors have traditionally provided support for community forestry through aid and short-term projects. By contrast, the VPA legal approach allows for systemic issues to be tackled and greater sustainability to be achieved. In the context of a VPA designed to support community forestry, systemic issues could include: clarifying and revising laws and regulations relating to rights to access and use forest resources, management requirements and access to finance. These are essential preconditions to strengthen local communities' livelihoods.

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signing with the Central Africa Forest Initiative to finance its REDD+ investment plan.

Linking local communities with national and regional policy agendas

A major success of the CoNGOs project was increasing the participation of marginalised groups, including women, in discussions on community forestry and forest governance, as they are severely affected by forest loss. This entailed working with journalists and community radio networks to raise awareness about key issues through video and other media.[11] Such collaborations helped to reach out to the public and remote communities, helping to inform vulnerable groups about forest governance, community rights and engagement in forest management, which led some communities to request support for creating community forest pilots.[12] Another key success was lobbying for communities and indigenous groups to be directly represented in the VPA structures. As a result, for the first time since the VPA process was launched, local communities and indigenous groups secured a seat at VPA meetings, including access to training and funding to participate effectively. They were able to voice concerns about violations of community rights and the need for income-generating opportunities, and to invoke global human rights norms (for example, using the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples to assert their rights to territorial sovereignty).

Creating a shared vision for the future

Shaping a brighter future for the Congo Basin depends on countries in the region managing their natural resources transparently and accountably. This means that a shared vision for

community forestry at the national level is vital. Some Congo Basin countries have already developed such a vision, although it is far from complete. But strengthening communities' rights in ongoing land and forestry legal reforms using VPA multistakeholder dialogue and climate-related processes could help harmonise local priorities and consolidate ownership. Meanwhile, consistent support by civil society to carry out research and advocacy will also help demonstrate benefits to sustainable development over the long term.

Finally, it is crucial to strengthen forest governance at the community level by focusing on existing structures or community initiatives and ensuring the involvement of marginal groups (women and indigenous populations) who are also key players in community forest initiatives. This can be done using bottom-up approaches and the principles of free, prior and informed consent to empower local communities and indigenous peoples and give them a real say.

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Knowledge Products

Contact

About the project

This briefing is one of five on the 'NGOs collaborating for equitable and sustainable community livelihoods in the Congo Basin forests' (CoNGOs) project. Launched in 2016 in the Congo Basin — where the second-largest tropical rainforest provides the livelihoods of 40 million people — the project aimed to improve the livelihoods of forest-dependent communities through better governance and practice. The project partners believe that strengthening the organisation and capacities of CSOs and local communities to secure and develop community forestry rights and enterprises have been central to achieving this. CoNGOs was led by IIED with a consortium of NGO partners in five countries. UK: ClientEarth, Fern, Forest Peoples Program, Rainforest Foundation UK, Well Grounded. Cameroon: Association OKANI, Centre for Environment and Development, INADES-Formation. CAR: Réseau des Populations Autochtones et Locales pour la gestion durable des écosystèmes forestiers de Centrafrique, Centre pour l'Information Environnementale et le Développement Durable. ROC: Organisation pour le Développement et les Droits Humains au Congo, Forum pour la Gouvernance et les Droits de l'Homme, Comptoir Juridique Junior. DRC: Tropenbos International.

Notes

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