

Case study 4 - The Use of Small Grants to Build Civil Society Capacity to Support Conservation : Lessons Learned from Gabon

Constant Allogo



Objectives of the IUCN Small Grants Program

For national NGOs, insufficient financial and technical resources are a serious handicap hampering their development and their participation in national, regional and international efforts for the conservation and sustainable management of natural resources.

In order to address this situation, the Central African Regional Program for the Environment (CARPE), since its launch in 1995, set up a fund through the Small Grants Program for national NGOs with the aim of supporting them directly in their efforts to contribute to the process of rational management and use of Central African forest ecosystems.

In its objectives, CARPE has made environmental governance one of the key avenues for the sustainable and profitable management of natural resources for all. Its founding principle is to involve all stakeholders in the various stages of the decision-making process relating to issues of en-

vironmental governance.

Identifying and putting in place conditions and practices necessary to reduce the rate of deforestation and biodiversity loss in Central Africa is the driving force behind CARPE. To this end, the involvement of all stakeholders, especially civil society, in the management of forests is indispensable. The quality of this involvement is directly related to the technical capacity of NGO leaders.

The support given to national NGOs and other civil society actors is mostly in the form of capacity building, enabling them to better master the problems of natural resource conservation and management. Building the capacity of local NGOs also includes training (of various kinds) for managers as well as the purchase of state-of-the-art working equipment.

Civil society actors

Gabonese civil society has received support from CARPE on several fronts. This support, direct or

indirect, is the outcome of the work of CARPE's partners and it makes visible the work that national NGOs are carrying out on the ground.

Communities living close to protected areas (national parks and reserves) have a huge responsibility in the use of the forest that surrounds them. In as much as these communities can contribute to resource degradation, so too can they take part in their protection.

Thus, in landscapes, CARPE partners, the World Wildlife Fund (WWF) and the Wildlife Conservation Society (WCS), have directly (without direct grants) given priority to local communities within the framework of community management of natural resources through the development and promotion of income-generating activities in a bid to arrive at cost-effective management of natural resources. This involvement of local communities is done through raising awareness and providing information while taking into account the potential and specificity of the area.

Around the Lope National Park, communities are organizing themselves to enhance their livelihoods through the development of cultural tourism. In Kasamabika, special emphasis is put on masked traditional dances.

In Ebel Abanga, in the south of the Monts de Cristal National Park, WWF is doing some brainstorming

Within the periphery of the Batéké Plateau National Park, several local community associations have been created and their officials trained. Some of these local associations are developing ecotourism activities based around elephants. After a WCS study of how often elephants visit the bay (shoreline) of the River Mpassa, the local communities decided to open channels along the river in order to enable tourists to visit the shores where a great number of elephants are found. This experience has galvanized the local communities of the Kessala group of villages that presently are still developing ecotourism around the elephant. This activity makes it possible to fight combat elephant hunting and poaching in general. These elephants, thus protected, are more economically profitable for the community concerned alive than dead.

with the local communities on exploiting the manatee for ecotourism purposes.

All of these CARPE initiatives within landscapes are pertinent ways of involving local communities in the management and use of natural resources. Meanwhile, better coordination of the actions of all stakeholders (business operators and the administration) increase the income (still low) generated from these activities.

Alongside this process of developing alternative income-generating activities, CARPE and its partners take part in the training of national NGO leaders. The World Resources Institute (WRI) has for more than a year been organizing a series of training courses in cartography and satellite imagery for better management of forestry information. This is to support forest control through the *Interactive Forestry Atlas* of Gabon Project.

Within the framework of the Small Grants Program, CARPE puts funds at the disposal of national NGOs, aimed at helping them develop and implement their projects. The goal is to encourage civil society to initiate activities that will guarantee the rational and sustainable use of natural resources. The funds are there to reinforce the efforts that national NGOs are already making in terms of the conservation and rational management of natural resources. Thus, projects that are funded are those identified and executed by the NGOs themselves.

Projects submitted to the Small Grants Program are mostly in the areas of environmental education and information. The *Centre d'Actions pour le Développement Durable et l'Environnement* (CADDE) received a small grant to establish an educational corridor more than 2 km long in the Gazetted Forest of Mondah. The biodiversity of this forest can be seen all along the corridor. This environmental education project has enabled CADDE to organize visits to the forest for several students from Libreville and its periphery.

The same Small Grants Program has financially supported environmental education projects initiated by Aventures Sans Frontières (ASF). This NGO has made presentations on the exploitation



Several young people visit this educational corridor at Combat II, Cap Estérias

of natural resources in Gabon and on the threats caused by wildlife exploitation, in several primary schools in Libreville.

For several years, the *Amis du Pangolin* (ADP) has received funding from the Small Grants Program for the publication of the environmental newsletter *Le cri du pangolin* (The cry of the Pangolin). These funds have made it possible to publish and distribute free of charge this sub-regional newsletter devoted exclusively to environmental information.

Within the Gamba and Mayumba regions, the Program has co-funded information and awareness campaigns run by IBONGA and Mayumba Nature. These campaigns, geared towards the

hunting of turtles, invite children and adults to change their attitudes towards this endangered species.

Other areas of activity are also covered, such as local community rights or research. On the issue of local community rights, the Program supports the Brainforest initiative whose goal is to make the population aware of their rights with regard to forest logging. The Brainforest project entails popularizing to the population around Minkébé National Park the legal provisions of the Forestry Code, namely that logging companies are obliged to invest in the communities situated close to their forest concessions.



The ASF environmental education programme in schools and on the Pongara beach

Still through the Small Grants Program, the *Forêt-Développement* NGO has carried out a study on “the conservation of humid ecosystems and sustainable development in the Etimboué District”. This project’s goal is to come up with a map of the Etimboué humid ecosystem, raising the awareness of the population on the socio-economic and ecological challenges of the conservation of humid ecosystems, and providing training on the design and management of micro-projects that favour biodiversity conservation and socio-economic development.

Until this day in Gabon, we have witnessed some kind of emulation of environmental NGOs that are making efforts to specialize in specific areas.

Lessons learnt

Although individual NGOs will always specialize to some extent in the projects that they develop and activities that they carry out, there is also a strong willingness on their part to come together at times and form a platform in order to work together to raise some of their concerns and better coordinate their actions.

At a national level, it has been observed that there has been a marked improvement in the interventions and positions of national NGOs on delicate questions related to the preservation of the environment and exploitation of natural resources.

The decision to combine efforts has made it possible for national environmental NGOs to be represented in several national structures. Thus, they have a member who takes part in the Social and Economic Council of Gabon and in the Management Committee of the National Agency for National Parks.

National environmental NGOs, organized into a platform, are increasingly being listened to. It was they who pointed out the inadequacies of the iron mining project in Belinga. This project was to be carried out without a preliminary environmental impact assessment. Its mining activities would seriously impact the three national parks situated close to the site: the Minkébé, Ivindo and Mwa-

gna National Parks. It also includes building a hydro-electric dam on the Kongou Falls. The internationalization of this project, through the actions of the NGO, has caused national authorities to revise the project in a number of ways that includes doing an environmental impact assessment.

The project to construct a second international airport in Libreville has also prompted some reaction from national NGOs. The State is proposing to construct this airport in the Mondah Gazetted Forest (FCM), situated within the northern periphery of Libreville.

The construction of this airport and the development of related activities will lead to the complete destruction of the FCM. This forest plays a key role in the training of National Forestry School students, as their practicals are carried out there. Also, the new airport will seriously impact the Akanda National Park, a site that is well known worldwide for the thousands of migratory birds that visit it annually.

Criticisms

Out of the various criticisms levelled at national NGOs by both national and international actors, we will comment on two that could be solved if the will was there.

The present level of capacity building of NGOs, though appreciable, still falls far short of what is needed. Their weak structure means most of them lead a very precarious existence which can have a negative impact on their activities. Very few national NGOs have permanent staff; several of them work mostly on a voluntary basis and only exist due to the dedication of their leaders. A sustainable funding mechanism for NGOs would help stabilize them and make their activities more visible.

The legal framework governing and organizing associations is not adapted to the context. The big changes that associations have known, with the coming of national organizations and the execution of large-scale activities, require a legal framework that is in line with the realities of the day.

In terms of the legal provisions of Law No. 35/62 of 10 December 1962, on the creation and organization of associations, many NGOs are working illegally.

Conclusion

As mentioned above, several national and international actors have criticized local NGOs on matters of form and content.

Administrative authorities assert that local NGOs are mere mouthpieces for their international partners, i.e., they only express the thoughts of the “foreigners” on whom they depend. Apart from this, these same authorities often accuse NGOs of being involved in politics, even though they are constituted as “apolitical associations”. This criticism was used to justify the suspension of Gabonese NGOs in January 2008. Besides these criticisms from the authorities, development partners think that national NGOs are “weak” and “not well structured”. They may not have the required capacities to face the challenges of achieving sustainable development.

The experience of the Small Grants Program shows clearly that national NGOs need more financial resources and technical guidance to promote the principles of sustainable and rational management of natural resources.

In order to build on the work already undertaken by CARPE, and moving beyond national initiatives, greater coordination of the efforts of members of the Congo Basin Forest Partnership is needed, to help strengthen the capacity of NGOs at the organizational and financial levels. To achieve this, the Commission for the Forests of Central Africa (COMIFAC) may, through its specialized bodies, create a project development fund for national NGOs.

A sustainable funding mechanism for national environmental NGOs will inevitably contribute to building up their organizational capacities, and quantitatively and qualitatively improve their participation in the sustainable management of natural resources.

In spite of these inadequacies, civil society has already undergone a remarkable evolution, with a marked improvement in the activities carried out.

The CARPE strategy of involving all of civil society in the management of natural resources and in the improvement of the living conditions of local communities underlies all efficient field activities that play a part in environmental conservation as well as the rational and sustainable use of resources. It is essential for national NGOs to be committed to acquiring adequate skills and to shouldering their responsibilities.