

The Use of Small Grants to Build Civil Society Capacity to Support Conservation : Lessons Learned from the CARPE Program

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Introduction

Central Africa contains the second largest area of contiguous moist tropical forest in the world. More than 80 million people that live in the forested region depend on their rich forests and other biotic resources for their livelihoods and economic development. The Central African forests form the catchment basin of the Congo River, a watershed of local, regional and global significance. The forest also provides valuable ecological services by controlling and buffering climate at a regional scale, and by absorbing and storing excess carbon dioxide released from the burning of fossil fuels, helping to slow the rate of global warming. Nonetheless, the forest is subject to many threats, including slash-and-burn agriculture, indiscriminate harvesting for fuel wood and charcoal production, poaching and logging. All these threats are derived from an underlying factor – human survival. Mitigating these threats is a challenge that goes beyond national boundaries

to require regional and international mobilization.

A principal strategy of the Central African Regional Program for the Environment (CARPE) for creating sustainable natural resource management (NRM) practices in the field is to implement a “People-Centred Approach” to conservation in the field and to foster improved environmental governance in the region. Strengthening local NGOs has been a long-standing CARPE strategy since its inception in 1995.

Conservation efforts will not be sustainable without a strong constituency within civil society as well as government. Hence, CARPE has, since its inception, devised and implemented a small grants component as a mechanism to build civil society capacity to: a) mobilize national and regional constituents to advocate for a strong regulatory framework for good NRM practices; b) engage in robust dialogue with governments to reform forest management policies through the application of empirical data from landscape pro-

grammes and field research; c) promote livelihood and income-generating activities in a rural setting; and d) integrate gender considerations into conservation strategies and policies.

The IUCN Small Grants Program, funded by CARPE, acknowledges that painstaking effort is required to build local NGO capacity, but after ten years of consistent support to NGOs, it is clear that the results are exceptional and far-reaching. This document is a synthesis of lessons learned from six country case studies. It distils some of the major accomplishments of the small grants programme as a way of illustrating what has been learned from these years of experience in 1) empowering civil society to advocate for and contribute to sustainable NRM through the promotion of laws and policy reform; 2) supporting livelihood activities that reduce threats to natural resources; 3) laying the foundations for a stable partnership amongst a multitude of stakeholders for forest conservation in the region; and 4) integrating gender considerations into conservation strategies.

What is CARPE?

The USAID Central African Regional Program for the Environment (CARPE) is a 20-year US Government (USG) commitment to help reduce the rate of forest degradation and loss of biodiversity through increased local, national and regional NRM capacity in nine countries of the Congo Basin. CARPE is the principal USG contribution to the Congo Basin Forest Partnership (CBFP), established at the World Summit on Sustainable Development in 2002. CARPE partners aim to apply and implement sustainable NRM practices in the field, improve environmental governance in the region, and strengthen natural resource monitoring capacity. To achieve its goal, the CARPE strategy comprises three integrated elements; three pillars called the intermediate results framework¹ :

- 1) Natural resources managed sustainably, or the landscape programme;
- 2) Natural resources governance strengthened (institutions, policies, laws) known as the

- programme for good governance; and
- 3) Natural resources monitoring institutionalized, or the monitoring and evaluation programme.

The CARPE approach to small grants

Conserving the tropical forest of Central Africa is a challenge beyond the capacity of national governments, individual donors or international organizations alone. A network of actors working in concert, including national and local civil society, is essential if CARPE's goals are to be attained. However, when CARPE started in 1995, NRM capacity within civil society was all but non-existent (Pielemeier et al., 2006). The first Earth Summit in Rio de Janeiro in 1992 inspired the first local conservation NGOs in Central Africa. Before then, one-party governments had frowned on any organization or association which seemed to pose a threat to State authority or influence. Governments believed that only they could solve the problems facing their country and their people. This centralization of power reduced people's enthusiasm for self-help groups, which often developed into NGOs.

Notwithstanding, CARPE in its design strategy posited that the long-term sustainability of conservation efforts was impossible without the strong empowerment and involvement of civil society. Hence, since its inception, the programme has taken two approaches to building civil society capacity: 1) support to the CEFDHAC (*Conférence sur les Ecosystèmes Forestiers Denses et Humides d'Afrique Centrale*) process which started in 1995 to provide an opportunity for the nascent Central African civil society to gain access to a platform for international and regional discourse on environment and to get their voices heard; and 2) implementation of a small grants programme in six Central African countries with the main objectives over the first five years (1998–2002) of: a) building institutional and human resource capacity amongst civil society organizations for NRM through a sort of learning-

¹ See page 5 of the CARPE Performance and Monitoring Plan (PMP).

by-doing process; b) increasing Central African participation in CARPE activities and encourage their buy-in; c) raising local awareness of CARPE by providing information about CARPE objectives and strategies; and d) raising awareness of gender considerations. In the course of these five years, approximately 80 small grants were awarded (worth an average of US\$8000 each) through a system of proposal submission and review. Screening proposals was a two-stage process: first a national review by the country Focal Points, followed by final approval from the regional office. Preparation of proposals and their subsequent evaluation were based on two pages of general guidelines with intensive exchanges between the CARPE Focal Points and the potential grantees to fine-tune the content of proposals. Awarded grants focused on small-scale research and field studies, seminars and workshops, education and sensitization, training sessions, policy studies and publications. The average project duration was five months.

In 2003, CARPE moved (Phase I to II) towards a much larger field operational presence in response to the USG-initiated CBFP. Phase II was designed based on the increased USG knowledge of Central African institutions, forests and biodiversity gathered from the Phase I experience. The operations of the small grants programme evolved in this new context to capitalize on the civil society capacity developed over the first five years. This allowed the small grants to become more focused as a mechanism to mobilize and motivate civil society to advocate for good governance in the forestry sector, foster economic growth to improve local livelihoods, and integrate gender consideration into conservation activities.

During this phase, grants have been awarded to local NGO networks, community-based organizations (CBOs) and local associations based on a “new” comprehensive manual of policy and procedures² that set the rules and regulations including environmental compliance, monitoring and evaluation. The amount of each grant has in-

creased substantially to an average of US\$30,000 and the average project duration is one year. This increase reflects the increased capacity of the recipient NGOs. Proposal selection still involves two steps: the first step is at the country level led by the national CARPE Focal Point charged with coordinating a multi-actor National Steering Committee. Proposals shortlisted at the country level are sent to a Regional Steering Committee for a final decision. Once the grant is awarded, its implementation is monitored by the Focal Points and results are included in the CARPE overall reporting system.

On-the-ground impact of the Small Grants Program

The implementation of the Small Grants Program over the past 12 years has yielded substantial results, exceeding expectations in several ways: a) civil society is much better organized and mobilized for advocating common interest policy reforms and/or implementation of good governance in the forestry and NRM sector; b) the promotion of economic growth and social welfare activities within communities is greatly enhanced; and c) the integration of gender considerations into NRM and forest conservation has been given a great deal of attention.

Civil society mobilization and advocacy for policy reform and good governance

Critical threats to the integrity of forest resources in Central Africa are primarily from small-scale slash-and-burn agriculture, illegal and unsustainable forest harvest operations and general ignorance of the consequences of unsustainable practices and viable alternatives. Dealing with these threats at the local level is difficult and awkward to manage for both government administrations and international NGOs. However, in many cases, local NGOs and CBOs, empowered by small grants, have shown outstanding responses

² See the IUCN/CARPE small grant policy and procedure manual at http://carpe.umd.edu/resources/Documents/IUCN_small_grant_policy_and_procedure_manual_EN.pdf.

in addressing this challenge.

When the Small Grants Program started in DRC in 2000, the country was just emerging from a long period of instability and had neither a forestry code nor an environmental code. *Decrees, arrêtés* and *notes circulaires* regulating forestry activities or environmental compliance were scattered in different offices and ministerial departments, and there was no single resource document that contained the entire regulatory framework for environmental protection. A small grant to a local NGO called “*Avocats Verts*” enabled them to assemble all these decrees and legal regulatory documents into one source book entitled *Recueil des textes juridiques en matière environnementale en République Démocratique du Congo*. This publication set the stage and paved the way for the production and endorsement by the government of the 2002 DRC Forestry Code. Now the same NGO is helping the DRC Ministry of Environment and Nature to draft and promulgate implementing decrees under this new forestry code.

Getting the laws and regulations guiding the use and management of natural resources to the grass-roots communities, particularly women that are intimately involved in managing or extracting these natural resources on a daily basis, is needed if good conservation practices are to be maintained at the grass-roots level, but this poses a massive administrative, logistical and educational challenge. All too often, the laws and regulation documents are available to the elites in cities but are neither known, nor applied in the field by local communities. Even when some of these documents become available in print form, literacy is a barrier. Documents written in French for poor and barely educated people are ineffective. REFADD (*Réseau des Femmes Africaines pour le Développement Durable*), a regional network of a large number of female NGOs, identified this weakness, and through a CARPE small grant decided to take on this challenge. To date, REFADD has translated the entire Forestry Code of DRC into Lingala, the most commonly spoken language in the forested area of the country and have disseminated more than 500 copies of the Code in the Bandundu territories of Lisala and Bongandanga in the Equator province. This acti-

vity triggered international donor interest – SNV, a Dutch organization, then translated the same forestry code into the so-called “Simplified Lingala” and disseminated it widely in the DRC.

In the Ituri Epulu Aru Landscape in DRC, artisanal illegal logging for charcoal production is a principal driver of deforestation. With the help of a small grant, a local NGO called Comité des exploitants et négociants de Mambasa (CENEM) has mobilized these illegal artisanal loggers into formal associations hence providing them with a legal status that has turned their activities into formal operations with all that entails, including obtaining legal logging permits, paying taxes, using operational techniques that are more friendly to the environment, and the production and dissemination of improved stoves to women. This halved the charcoal consumption in the community. The project was so successful that it was extended to the Virunga National Park to address the issue of deforestation due to wood harvesting for charcoal production.

Poaching is a serious threat to biodiversity. Harvesting species from the IUCN “Critically Endangered (CR)” category and/or endemic species is a crime. However, in Central Africa, many poachers are ignorant of the law, and hence cannot be held wholly responsible for their crime. Therefore, following on from its work on disseminating the Forestry Code, REFADD through a small grant mobilized its entire network to promote and disseminate wildlife laws. The wildlife law in DRC was translated into local languages and 1000 copies disseminated. Noticeboards featuring wildlife laws in local languages and pictures of endangered and endemic species were drawn up and posted around protected areas in four of the most forested countries of the Congo Basin (DRC, ROC, Cameroon and CAR). Hunters/poachers were organized into networks and were trained in wildlife laws. Communities were organized into Comités de vigilance in the Ituri area of the DRC (these included local associations, police, government territorial administration officials and judiciary members) for an anti-poaching campaign, a sort of local eco-guard team.

In Cameroon, where a forestry code and associated legal forest regulation frameworks had

been well established for many years, local NGOs, with the help of CARPE small grants, analyzed the constraints of implementing the forestry code at local level, which highlighted and identified gaps between theory and practice. This information then informed new written operational guidelines and implementing texts, essentially with the outcome of empowering the local NGOs to serve as technical advisors to policy and decision makers.

In some countries like Gabon and ROC where NGOs were still very weak and inexperienced, yet established legal frameworks for NRM such the forestry code and the wildlife code were well developed, CARPE small grant funding supported environmental education and the dissemination of legal information governing natural resources. Thus, the Centre d'Actions pour le Développement Durable et l'Environnement (CADDE) received a small grant to set up a botanical sanctuary with a 2km nature trail in the Mondah forest to train secondary school students from Libreville and students from the school of forestry (Cap Esterias) in environmental sciences. Aventures Sans Frontières (ASF) launched a large environmental advocacy campaign through the design and display of photos and images highlighting unsustainable natural resource exploitation in Gabon and its subsequent impacts on wildlife.

The *Association des femmes juristes du Congo*, with a CARPE small grant, produced the first ever Republic of Congo Code de l'environnement. In Gabon, Les Amis du Pangolin (ADP) received a small grant to edit and distribute free of charge several volumes of a regional environmental newspaper, *Le Cri du Pangolin*. Another NGO in ROC, ANN (Alliance Nationale pour la Nature), received a grant to produce and disseminate the first newspaper specializing in environmental issues. The newspaper called *L'araignée* publicized provocative information that mobilized the community to combat wildlife poaching and illegal logging in the Concouati National Park of ROC.

Still in the spirit of getting environmental information to the public, the NGO called *Club des Amis de la Nature de l'université Marien Ngouabi* in 2002 received a grant to establish a "green"

cyber-café in the Brazzaville University campus open to all students and the public, serving as an internet café and interactive information centre for research on forestry and environment to inform and develop future environmental advocates.

In countries like Burundi and Rwanda where forest areas have been almost completely converted into farmland, the small grants have supported a different approach, emphasizing the conservation of the remaining patches of protected areas and the restoration of degraded lands. In Burundi, small grant activities focused on a) building civil society capacity to compile all the laws and regulations guiding the management of protected areas, b) developing advocacy materials such as pamphlets in French as well in local languages and to disseminate these materials to communities living around protected areas, and c) organizing information campaigns to stimulate government members including the national police to enforce the implementation of the country's laws.

The development and promotion of economic growth and social welfare activities within communities

The promotion and development of economic growth and social welfare activities as a natural resource conservation strategy is a fundamental requirement but a substantial challenge for the large international conservation NGOs and government agencies alike. However, civil society in several instances has been able to be effective in this role through the Small Grants Program.

In DRC, the female NGO network REFADD has revived agriculture in the CBFP Maringa Lopori Wamba Landscape, helping a network of 50 local associations composed of about 350 women to organize themselves to plant 300 ha of improved staple food crop varieties. In Gabon, just informing the local communities in the area west of the Minkébé National Park of their rights under the logging concessions' cahiers de charges, has allowed these communities to defend and improve their livelihoods through demanding bene-

fits from the logging companies that are laid down in Gabonese law.

Small grants have enabled civil society organizations to mobilize local communities to seek solutions to various environmental threats such as deforestation for charcoal production. In Rwanda, two local NGOs, SERUKA and AREDI have mobilized the ministry in charge of forests, technicians from the Institut des Sciences Agronomiques, community leaders in three sites and students to develop and put in place a plantation of about four hectares of trees, bamboo and rattan. They have also trained 12 agricultural monitors and 40 student members of the Club de l'Environnement while raising awareness of the threats of unsustainable practices.

In the ROC, an NGO called Association des Femmes Veuves de Fatima (AFVF) has organized itself with the support of a small grant to address the challenge of fuel wood shortage by planting three hectares of fast-growing species such as eucalyptus, while in Burundi, some local NGOs such as Enviro-protect have identified the need for and have promoted more efficient stoves for rural households, as another solution to the same problem. Other successful livelihood activities supported by the Small Grants Program include the promotion of ecotourism and beekeeping.

Integrating gender considerations into conservation strategies

CARPE recognizes the importance of promoting gender equity in its strategy of civil society empowerment. In addition to integrating gender considerations into its overall programme, it has specifically focused efforts on building the capacity of two networks of female NGOs. The network REFADD has had a substantial impact on the management of natural resources in Central Africa by effectively integrating women into NRM policies and activities. REFADD staff have benefited from intensive CARPE mentoring and training. The Centre d'Appui aux Femmes et aux Ruraux (CAFER), a local NGO managed by women, is conducting research on alternatives to slash-and-burn extensive agriculture and unsustainable hunting practices with CARPE small

grant support, a challenge that many international research institutes such as the World Agroforestry Centre (formerly the International Council for Research in Agroforestry – ICRAF), the International Institute of Tropical Agriculture (IITA) et al. have been working on for years with little effect in the field. These networks of female NGOs are increasingly the voice of all females among the civil society network.

Lessons learned

The CARPE strategy of distributing small grants, first as a tool to strengthen civil society's institutional and human resource capacity for NRM, and second as a mechanism to capitalize on these new capacities to empower civil society for good governance in forest conservation has shown positive results. The Central African landscape has evolved substantially since CARPE began in 1995, and at least some of the socio-political changes can be traced to the Small Grants Program. Today, the emergence of a responsive and accountable civil society that provides serious representation in environmental decision making is widely acknowledged. Civil society opinion now carries some weight in forestry and NRM policy making. While these changes can not be attributed solely to the Small Grants Program, it is reasonable to conclude that the capacity built through the small grants "learning-by-doing" approach over a period of many years has had a major impact on the sector.

Despite the demonstrable impacts shown in these cases, there are still possible improvements suggested by the review and feedback received over the past few years. Experience has shown that the Small Grant Policy and Procedure Manual should be revised to take into consideration some of the concerns of civil society as reflected in the last seven years of implementation.

1. Proposal preparation, screening and award procedures

- a) **Applications for grants should be done in two stages.** The first stage should just entail a project concept, which should only be followed by a full proposal if the Steering

Committee declares the concept worthy of further development. Several complaints have been recorded from civil society organizations about the fact that too much time and energy is devoted to developing a full project proposal for a small grant which may have a low probability of being funded.

- b) **Screening of small grant proposals needs to be transparent.** The system used during CARPE Phase I raised doubts over the transparency of the Small Grants Program. The CARPE Focal Point in each country was solely responsible for the first screening, and the final decision was made at the discretion of the Regional Coordinator. During Phase II the screening process is done at the national level by a national steering committee and the final grant approval made by a regional steering committee, which is perceived as being more transparent and even-handed.
- c) **Accountability in the use of small grant funds by civil society is greatly improved through close technical support from the Focal Points and scrutiny by the steering committees.** Embezzlement and misuse of grant funds are common amongst local NGOs. Many of the organizations lack proper accounting and audit systems. Having international NGOs and/or the CARPE Focal Points coach local NGOs as part of the monitoring and evaluation of the grant activities has shown promising results. The Small Grants Program has not encountered the problem of misuse of funds. As further evidence of increased fiscal management capacity, a network of local NGOs in the DRC called CRONE, a group long supported by the DRC CARPE Focal Point, received a grant of US\$150,000 from the World Bank to assist local communities in becoming engaged in logging title conversions. The money was deemed well spent and properly accounted for, which is considered a result of the mentorship provided by the CARPE Focal Point.
- d) **Providing grants to networks of local or regional NGOs has exponential effects.** Environmental problems are of a common nature, both nationally and throughout the Central Africa region. REFADD, a network

of female NGOs active in the four main forested countries of the Congo Basin, has tackled the issue of ignorance of the bushmeat law at the grass-roots level by translating the law into local languages and disseminating the result to local communities. This network approach is efficient and effective.

- e) **Providing grant applicants with feedback on why their proposals were funded or rejected is crucial for civil society capacity building.** In CAR a NGO called CODICOM (Comité pour le Développement Intégré des Communautés de Base) finally succeeded in being awarded a small grant in 2008 after four separate rejections in previous years. Their ultimate success was the result of continuous and long-lasting counselling with specific feedback each year to CODICOM on the weakness of their proposals.

2. Project implementation

- a) **Local NGOs implementing small grant activities need coaching and support.** Most projects that have been completed successfully have required either CARPE Focal Points or international NGO support. In Gabon the local NGO IBONGA-ACPE (Association pour la Connaissance et la Protection de l'Environnement) has been successful in mobilizing communities around the Gamba network of protected areas for ecotourism development mostly because WWF provided them with technical support.
- b) **Tying the Small Grants Program to the CARPE landscape programme has been very important in integrating local associations and CBOs fully into CARPE activities on the ground.** This is the case with IBONGA in the Gamba landscape, REFADD in the Maringa Lopori Wamba, ROSE in the Lobéké and many others. During CARPE Phase I, most of the NGOs that benefited from the Small Grants Program were based in the capital cities.

3. The capacity of small grants to empower civil society

- a) **Local NGOs' ability and credibility when addressing subjects of national interest in the realm of environmental protection and natural resource exploitation has increased with "learning-by-doing" experience and expanded institutional capacity.** Local NGO voices are heard much more than a decade ago. In Gabon for instance they are represented in specific government structures such as the Economic Council of Gabon and the national park system agency, which are political decision-making government institutions. This official recognition has turned civil society organizations into government technical advisors rather than opponents of government per se. In DRC, a local NGO was appointed as a consultative member to the Social and Economic Council of the United Nations (ECODOC) on questions concerning local development. In Cameroon, efforts by civil society to help the ministry to inform policy decisions with empirical information has inspired the Minister of Environment to appoint the CARPE Focal Point as the facilitator to compile civil society inputs in the form of policy briefs to inform the process of revising the 1994 Forestry code.

4. The capacity of small grants to mobilize civil society for advocacy

- a) **Experience of local NGOs in implementing projects and mobilizing public opinion has increased their capacity for more structured advocacy efforts.** In several instances, local NGOs have raised objections to government decisions. In Gabon, the concession to the Belinga iron mine, an environmentally sensitive site surrounded by three national parks (Minkébé, Ivindo and Mwagna), was granted to a Chinese company by the government without any provision for environmental impact assessment. A coalition of Gabonese NGOs advocated very strongly for the government to follow its own environmental laws, with

great success. The government decision was eventually amended and the concession agreement was revised to include measures to mitigate potential negative environmental impacts.

- b) **Governments have grown to respect the voices of NGOs in making development decisions with environmental impacts.** The site chosen by the Gabon government for the construction of a second airport in Libreville was feared by citizens to have substantial negative consequences such as too much noise, impacting on the nearby Akanda National Park, a site internationally well known as a critical nesting site for migrating birds. Additionally, it was feared that the airport would destroy a nearby relic rain forest that serves as a site for practical training for the Cap Esterias forestry school. Again the coalition of local NGOs advocated for a review of the decision, and the government responded by putting the project on hold.
- c) **Strengthened NGOs can play an important role in promoting the "rule of law" by educating citizens on legal requirements and the impacts of illegal NRM activities.** In DRC, REFADD's efforts to disseminate information on relevant laws to local communities, and setting up networks of comités de vigilance have achieved concrete results. Local communities have reported eight cases of wildlife poaching and/or trafficking to the police, and the poachers and traffickers were prosecuted and fined. This outcome was unprecedented in DRC and it shows how small grants, by building civil society capacity and providing some funding for specific activities, can be effective tools for law enforcement as well as compliance.

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