

Trip Report -- J. F. Swartzendruber
Congo Basin Day - European Tropical Forestry Advisors Group (ETFAG)
Florence, 20 November 1997

1. Introduction

This report summarizes the second donor meeting on forest sector issues in the Congo Basin countries, held in conjunction with the ETFAG meeting of Nov. 18-19, 1997, hosted by the Istituto Agronomico per l'Oltremare in Florence. This follows the donor coordination meeting on Congo Basin forestry issues, hosted by the European Commission in Brussels last April. Donors in Brussels felt there was unfinished business requiring another meeting, though no formal decision was taken on the need for a longer-term coordination process.

2. Summary of Presentations

As in Brussels, the Florence meeting drew a significant turn-out, with 55 participants representing some 30 agencies. The Overseas Development Institute distributed an updated version of the background paper prepared for Brussels, "The Forestry Sector in the Congo Basin - Overview of Donor Activities and Review of the Donor Coordination Meeting, April 1997" (copies of this report, and list of participants at Florence, are available on request).

(a) François Gaulme, of the *Centre d'Etude d'Afrique Noire* (CEAN) in Bordeaux presented a paper on recent political trends in central Africa and discussed perspectives on risk assessment. For donors trying to judge whether the situation is more likely to stabilize or to remain volatile, Gaulme's presentation was thought-provoking, and some points of particular interest are repeated here (a copy of his article is also available on request):

- despite the rhetoric, donors are now less concerned about democracy - at least as measured by electoral progress - just one week after Paul Biya's "astonishing" electoral victory, the Paris Club cancelled much of Cameroon's remaining official debt.
- the post-Cold War period may be heading toward a new era of regional/sub-regional power alignments in Africa. Angola is now flexing its muscles (notably in the sudden conquest of Brazzaville) and tensions are rising between Kinshasa and Luanda. Angola fears secessionist impulses in Cabinda and will fight any perceived threat to its oil interests in the enclave.
- South Africa does not want to see Angola become too dominant, as this threatens Pretoria's own interests, notably in southern DRC. South Africa is playing a much stronger diplomatic role in the region.
- For its part, France fears South Africa as a competitor for commercial and political influence in central Africa, and (indirectly) intervened to help Sassou-Nguesso against Lissouba, with assistance from Gabon.
- On the other hand there is strong likelihood of resumed civil war in Angola, and the military and political situation in DRC /Congo-Kabila remains very unstable.
- "Economic Exclusion Zones" extending into the Gulf of Guinea oil fields could potentially bring Equatorial Guinea, Nigeria, Gabon, Angola and Sao Tome into confrontation; Sao Tome is increasingly under pressure to come under some form of "protection" from Angola.
- The 1994 devaluation is still having repercussions on political stability. On the whole the region is more unstable than it has been since the mid-1960's, with the difference that today there are far more arms available, and petrodollars available to finance arms as well as mercenaries. Armed groups now roam many parts of central Africa with unclear political allegiance and few checks on their movement or behavior.
- This is aggravated by ethnic alignments; for ex., in CAR Pres. Patasse is close to southern Chadian rebels, while his Yakoma rivals have links with ex-Mobutu supporters.

(b) Cynthia Cook reported on World Bank and EDI activities, including the ending of the PARN project in CAR, and the likely restructuring of the GEF-Cameroon project following the mid-term review. The Bank has a new facility which will allow grants direct to NGOs, and this could be a significant new opportunity for environment-related work in the region. On the down-side, the forest sector policy dialogue in Cameroon is presently "off-track," though the Bank is working with the IMF to seek better coordination of efforts in this direction. The Bank wants to be seen as playing a supporting role in the region and is interested in seeing what can be achieved through existing initiatives such as CEFDHAC. Updates were also provided on the status of the REIMP/PRGIE project and the EDI policy training initiative.

(c) Although scheduled to speak on the Limbe Transparency International workshop, I instead gave a short presentation of CARPE activities presently underway or proposed (mostly output from the BSP "air-traffic control" database). Among responses to this presentation, several advised CARPE to try to liaise with other groups also involved in NTFP-related work, and also to be aware of risks from over-harvesting of such products, e.g. medicinal plants.

(d) Karl Hermann Schmincke of FAO gave a short talk on problems in present approaches to timber certification, particularly unresolved technical issues surrounding criteria and indicators. Another factor is the growing importance of Asian timber markets less sensitive to environmental considerations. This triggered a discussion of the recent experience of the company Leroy Gabon, which has abandoned an effort to certify its timber. This is taken by some to illustrate the high cost and impracticality of certification; others answer that the real issue was lack of willingness to make investments in better timber practices, rather than costs of certification *per se*.

(e) François Grison of CIRAD-Forêt presented a paper on the issue of natural forest management in Cameroon, criticising scattered projects and lack of coordination among donors, and pointing to a gap between the "supply and demand for forestry projects" in the country. Among other issues he raised was the lack of interest in supporting reforestation and plantation forestry: "Donors appear to be more interested in promoting their own ideas and values about conservation." Natural forest management and conservation operates on a scale in the range of 10^6 ha, while plantation efforts remain at the level of perhaps 10^3 ha. On the other hand, it may well be that Cameroon has little interest in seeing more coordination within the donor community, thus the present disarray may serve certain purposes! (copies of Grison's paper are also available on request).

(f) Mark Perren of the Dutch BOS Foundation presented a paper on donor experience of ICDP's in Cameroon, making a number of points:

- there is still little or no monitoring of actual biodiversity loss-trends, making much of the present work impossible to evaluate in technical terms;
 - the European concept of exclusion as a basis for conservation continues to fit poorly within African cultural and political realities;
 - three-fourths of all Cameroon's conservation sites still have no official status;
 - despite these facts, most donor projects continue to press a technical approach rather than a "social" one which might better fit local realities;
 - donors disagree on many aspects of their (technical) approaches, and therefore prefer to work isolated from each other, while the government is unable or unwilling to provide integration.
- Donors have tended to use one or the other of three major approaches, often contradictory and seldom coordinated: (i) the Canadian approach promoting land-use planning and forestry inventory as a means of introducing a long-term system of rational exploitation based on zoning, as in Cameroon;

(ii) the British effort to restructure Ghana's forest sector, introducing permanent sample plots and a forest inventory system, using as its starting-point a baseline level of biological potential for each site;

(iii) the Côte d'Ivoire forest restoration program, to try to restore biomass in degraded forest areas of the eastern part of the country, which includes biodiversity monitoring. This approach requires the presence of a substantial donor with long-term presence, inventory work, repeated monitoring, and a "stepwise approach to intergrated management." The conclusions and recommendations of the BOS study include:

- it is time to abandon the artificial distinction between conservation work and commercial logging;
- most efforts remain too centralized, and don't recognize social and development priorities;
- financial sustainability needs more attention, perhaps through trust funds/endowments, and better use of forest taxes;
- the legal status of forest sites and activities needs improvement;
- project management is often weak and dominated by biologists and other technical disciplines with insufficient professionalism; more management training should be included in addition to the technical areas now emphasized, i.e. MBA degree programs;
- projects should have more independent review; and
- donors are in need of a "platform" for coordination; perhaps the system of regular meetings convened by WWF in Cameroon could be a useful starting point.

(g) Ndinga Assitou gave a presentation on CEFDHAC - the term "Brazzaville Process" having lately gone out of fashion - explaining the initiative's origins, its recent activities, and the meeting planned for January '98 in Kinshasa, and a short presentation was given on the work of the World Commission on Sustainable Forestry and Development (my report of the Commission's workshop in Yaounde last May has already been circulated).

(h) WWF Belgium (Jean Luc Roux and Dominick Plouvier) presented findings of studies on sustainable forest management and on transnational logging companies in ACP countries (I don't have copies of these documents, but perhaps WWF and/or WRI have them). Some brief points of interest: The 1993 logging ban in Sabah has seen a tripling in the price of meranti in Europe; Sabah had previously been a larger exporter than the combined total for Africa, (8 to 10 mill. m³ per yr.)! Among Asian companies Gabon is now seen as a more "interesting" supplier than Cameroon due to the latter's new forest laws. Nevertheless, it was reported that Cameroonian timber exports rose from 700,000 to 1.1 million m³ during 1997-97, with the share of exports to Asia rising from 13% to 53%. The overall pattern reported is one of "mining" forests rather than forestry as conceived in industrial countries. There remains a deep split between the "soft" and "hard" sectors of forestry, with the former focusing on conservation and the latter representing commercial exploitation.

3. Summary of Discussion and Conclusion

GTZ (Mersmann) reiterated the message it had brought to the donor meeting in Brussels, that donor coordination should work in the context of national institutions rather than becoming a new entity in its own right. Another participant observed that international conservation groups are often reluctant to share information and feel threatened by coordination. In Cameroon, the French low-impact logging project (API) at Dimako is to be replaced by a new *Projet Forêts et Terroirs*. Another commented that in the past, logging companies were expected to build schools, support clinics, etc. but that when this system was changed to payment of more fees to government, the revenue never arrived locally while the previous services were not replaced.

French Cooperation (Olivier Hamel) wanted clarification of the relative roles of the ATO and CEFDHAC which seem to have considerable overlap at present: one speaks of managing forests, and the

other wants to manage ecosystems. Is this enough difference to justify two separate institutions? Also, perhaps it is time to think along the lines of a forum which would bring together existing bodies, including the private sector, rather than creating specialized new bodies. However, most of the institutional issues were not pursued (e.g. role of ATO and CEFDHAC), and some of the discussion periods were truncated in order to cover the original agenda.

Cameroon is widely seen as a case study needing further attention, and the group agreed that it would be useful to continue monitoring and sharing findings concerning this case. The issue of community forestry, and its application - or non-application - in the case of Cameroon was mentioned. Some nuances were pointed out which have evidently caused confusion in the past: under Cameroon's law, *communes* and *communautés* are not the same; thus *forêts communales* are classified forests, while *forêts communautaires* are not. There is also the distinction between "permanent" and "non-permanent" forests, which reflects legal status rather than silvicultural or ecological factors.

A substantial volume of written material had been distributed during the previous two days; documents which I collected include "*Report of the open-ended ad hoc intergovernmental forum on forests on its first session*," "*Instruments for sustainable private sector forestry*," "*The Congo Basin: Recent developments and alternatives for sustainable development*," "*Training and testing programme on EC guidelines for forest sector development cooperation*," "*Pilot programme to conserve the Brazilian rainforest: 4th participants meeting, Manaus 27-30 October 1997*," and "*Proposed plan for implementation of the recommendations by intergovernmental panel on forests*" (all available on request). Much of the discussion alternated between more generic tropical forestry-related issues (certification, criteria and indicators, follow-up to IPF, etc.) and other business specific to the Congo Basin.

Toward the end of the session the EC co-chair (Marjukka Mahonen) asked participants for their ideas on follow-up to this meeting. Swartzendruber suggested that future meetings should avoid using scarce group time to present reports, and instead focus on defining and discussing common issues or interests; written materials should be circulated ahead of the meeting. The value-added for this group lies in identifying areas for possible joint efforts, or for airing different views on technical subjects (e.g. conservation approaches) or broader themes (political risks). EDI (Mwangi Wachira) raised much the same issue, but no consensus was reached and the meeting was adjourned with no clear resolution of the group's future status.

The EC delegation promised to contact the participants with official minutes and also to solicit ideas concerning follow-up. By this time many of the participants had already left, an unfortunate aspect of having the Congo Basin meeting added to the end of another (two-day) meeting. "Meeting fatigue" and competing demands for time undermined the Florence session just as the agenda was moving toward discussion of the group's future. Much of this discussion will no doubt take place "off-line" thus by the time a third meeting is proposed the donors will have given their feedback to the EC with concrete suggestions. Several strategic issues will need to be addressed, e.g. the role and representation of central African governments, and of NGOs, and how best to link to other coordinating bodies such as CEFDHAC. The CARPE project is interested in hearing ideas and suggestions on these issues, and will bring these ideas to the attention of the EC when the issue of Florence follow-up is discussed.