

A forest conservation network: the experience of the Congo Basin Forest Partnership

The Congo Basin Forest Partnership aims to reconcile forest conservation with forest use. This article explains what a “policy network” of this sort can achieve and where its limits lie.

Central Africa contains the world’s second-largest area of contiguous tropical forest – smaller only than the Amazon forest and larger than the forests of South-East Asia. The viability of this ecosystem and its role in climate change mitigation and biodiversity are key to the future of our planet. They are also crucial to the economic and social development of the six countries that share this valuable resource. The combined area of these countries is 4 million square kilometres – roughly the area of the 27 EU states; the 1.6 million square kilometres of dense rainforest cover roughly the same proportion of the land as productive forests do in the EU. One difference is that in the EU the sustainable use of the region’s forests is a much less contentious issue than it is in the Congo Basin.

■ Goal convergence agreed

While scientists and NGO activists are still disputing whether the conservation and use of tropical forests can be reconciled with ecological, political, social and economic objectives, the representatives of the ten

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Congo Basin countries have already found a way forward. Their approach is based on “convergence” of the different objectives. Their regional forest strategy was adopted back in 1999 in Yaoundé/Cameroon, and at a second Forest Summit held in Brazzaville/Republic of the Congo in 2005 they agreed to implement the Action Plan (“plan de convergence”) drawn up by the Central African Forests Commission (COMIFAC), which had been established especially for this purpose

(see Box on page 18). At a third summit (“Yaoundé plus 12”) due to take place in Kinshasa/Democratic Republic of the Congo in June 2011 the aim will be to review what has been achieved so far and define the region’s role in implementing the agreements that the international community of states has reached in the meantime through the conventions on climate change and biological diversity.

Part of the Congo Basin: the Loango National Park in Gabon.



Photo: H. Schipulle

COMIFAC and CBFP

The Central African Forests Commission (COMIFAC) was founded in the wake of an agreement by the heads of state of six Central African countries in connection with the 1999 Yaoundé Declaration in Cameroon. The heads of state agreed on a process of voluntary commitment to the sustainable use of the forests of the Congo Basin and to cross-border regional cooperation. The objectives of this cooperation, all of which carry equal weight, are management of the forests for the benefit of the population (poverty reduction), for sustainable economic growth and for the conservation of biodiversity. The executive secretariat of COMIFAC is based in Yaoundé. The founder members of COMIFAC – Gabon, Cameroon, Congo, Central African Republic (CAR), Chad and Equatorial Guinea – have now been joined by the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), Rwanda, Burundi and Sao Tomé/Príncipe. In 2007 the heads of state recognised COMIFAC as a specialist organisation of the Economic Community of Central African States ECCAS/CEEAC, thereby making it a sub-organisation of the African Union (AU). The presidency of COMIFAC, which rotates every two years, was transferred in November 2010 from CAR to DRC.

The Congo Basin Forest Partnership (CBFP) was launched by the United States at the 2002 World Summit on Sustainable Development in Johannesburg. Today CBFP constitutes a network of more than 50 members with the intention to align their support, to share information and to better harmonise their activities: the governments of the Central African Forests Commission, other governmental members (USA, France, Germany, Canada – acting so far as CBFP’s steering facilitation – Belgium, European Commission, Japan, Netherlands, Norway, Spain and the UK), international organisations, NGOs and research institutions and members representing the private sector. An updated list is available on CBFP’s website www.pfbc-cbfp.org. The CBFP members decided to operate as a network without a secretarial structure. In order to ensure its function as a platform for dialogue and exchange, one member – on a rotation basis – is asked to serve as a coordinator (“facilitator”). At the beginning of a new facilitation phase members agree on a road map with priority areas of action. It is the responsibility of the facilitating member to set up internal and external communication tools and to offer opportunities for exchange.

■ The partnership

Since the 2002 Summit on Sustainable Development in Johannesburg, international state and non-governmental organisations, private companies and scientific institutes active in the region have been cooperating with representatives of governments and local institutions in the Congo Basin Forest Partnership (CBFP) with the aim of promoting the conservation and sustainable management of the Congo Basin’s forest ecosystems (see Box). The overall objective of the partnership has been specified in a Cooperation Framework as “to enhance the effectiveness of the partners’ interventions in favour of conservation and sustainable management of forest ecosystems, economic growth and poverty reduction in the countries of Central Africa”. Given its emphasis

on effectiveness and the development of synergies between ongoing or future projects, the CBFP’s sustainability principles anticipated the resolutions for good international cooperation endorsed in 2005 by the OECD Paris Declaration on Aid Effectiveness.

The CBFP is one of the still-active multi-stakeholder partnerships formed in the run-up to the Johannesburg Summit. Such partnerships are inspired by the understanding that formal structures – at national level, for instance, the institutions of representative democracy, or at international level the bodies charged with implementing the United Nations (UN) agreements – are frequently unable to sufficiently mobilise the civil-society stakeholders whose input is vital to solve highly complex problems. This

is why formal processes (“Type 1” in UN parlance) are supplemented by “Type 2” cooperation networks, the two types assuming complementary roles wherever possible.

For three years, from 2007 to 2010, Germany acted as facilitator of the partnership. This leadership role supplemented the long-term involvement of German development cooperation in two important forest countries in the region, Cameroon and the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), and its support of the regional organisation COMIFAC.

■ Potentials and limits

Some specific examples illustrate how active use of a policy network such as the CBFP can serve to initiate important processes or drive them forward – and where the limits of effectiveness lie:

- **Setting the political agenda:** At symposiums, sometimes involving ministers from the region, important issues have been placed on the agenda. Key issues were also addressed at the working groups, all of which were led by COMIFAC ministers, at the plenary session of the CBFP in Yaoundé in September 2009. These issues included: strengthening and reforming COMIFAC structures; the status of forest sector reforms in the region (including forest certification, negotiations on the EU’s Forest Law Enforcement, Governance and Trade/FLEGT action plan, adoption by the timber industry of principles of sustainable forest management); implementation and development of the COMIFAC Action Plan and more active involvement of the region in international forest-related negotiating processes; management of protected areas, balance between conservation and use interests and involvement of local populations.

- **Conflict mediation:** The heated international debate on the role of industrial timber operations in the sustainable management of tropical forests has repeatedly appeared on the agenda of the CBFP. For example, this made it possible to call an immediate halt to the non-transparent awarding of a timber concession on the fringe of the Dzanga-Sanga national park in the Central African Republic to a company well known in the region for dubious practices. Following further advice, the government of the Central African Republic made Forest Stewardship Council (FSC) certification a criterion for future concessions. Furthermore, working with the London-based NGO Chatham House and following consultation with the World Bank, three events addressing sector reform in the DRC were organised with the forest ministry. This has enabled the disputes over sustainable forest management, notably with the NGOs Greenpeace and Global Witness (neither of them CBFP members), to be transformed into a significantly more constructive dialogue. The heated dispute about certification practices in the Congo region at the general assembly of the FSC in Cape Town in 2008 prompted the facilitation and some CBFP partners to advance the creation of a regional standard. A special working group in the region is now pursuing this issue. The Interafrican Forest Industries Association (IFIA), FSC and two private companies have registered as members of the CBFP.
- **Mobilisation of programme financing:** The CBFP has no mandate to mobilise funding for the measures envisaged in the COMIFAC Action Plan or to undertake operative coordination of development cooperation. However, its advisory role regarding financing decisions and subsequent implementation has clearly proved motivating and helpful to donors. For example, assistance has been given to the Global Environment Facility (GEF), advice has been provided on the thematic orientation and organisational structure of the Congo Basin Forest Fund (CBFF), and the African Development Bank has been influenced in decisions on the structuring of its COMIFAC support programme.
- **Sino-Central African dialogue:** In the light of China's rapidly growing presence in forest-related sectors in Central Africa, the facilitation's initiative in commencing and actively supporting a dialogue was warmly welcomed by governments and CBFP partners as well as by the Chinese forest administration. The dialogue also encompassed private-sector stakeholders and the EU Commission's efforts at law enforcement in the timber trade through the FLEGT process.
- **The financing basis of COMIFAC:** An example of the limits of external influence is the so far fruitless attempt to induce the COMIFAC countries

to implement the financing mechanism agreed by heads of state. This mechanism would make the regional organisation independent of the uncertainties of annual funding allocations from the restricted budgets of the member states. Although the mechanism has been accepted by the majority of forest ministers, it has not been possible – despite repeated public appeals – to persuade the responsible finance ministers to pursue it.

■ The political will decides

Central Africa continues to face major challenges. At present the region remains relatively intact. Resource-related conflict will increase as the area's wealth is tapped. Thanks to their far-sighted forest conservation strategy, and with the Forest Commission with its emphasis on regional cooperation and the support of the Congo Basin Forest Partnership, the countries possess a range of instruments not available in other forest regions. Whether this constellation can be used to benefit the region's population and in the interest of humanity depends largely on the political will of the stakeholders in the countries of the region and on the resolve of all those involved in the Partnership.

A list of references can be obtained from the author.

Zusammenfassung

Zentralafrika beherbergt das zweitgrößte zusammenhängende Tropenwaldgebiet der Erde – nach Amazonien und vor Südost-Asien. Der dichte Regenwald umfasst rund 1,6 Millionen Quadratkilometer. Seit dem Nachhaltigkeitsgipfel 2002 in Johannesburg arbeiten in der Region tätige internationale staatliche und nichtstaatliche Organisationen, Privatunternehmen und wissenschaftliche Institute mit Vertretern von Regierungen und lokalen Institutionen in der Congo Basin Forest Partnership/ CBFP zusammen. Ihr Ziel ist es, den Schutz

und die nachhaltige Nutzung des sensiblen Ökosystems zu fördern. Der Beitrag beschreibt, was ein solches „Politiknetzwerk“ bewirken kann, aber auch, wo seine Grenzen liegen.

Resumen

El África central alberga la segunda región de bosques tropicales contiguos más grande del mundo por su tamaño, después de la Amazonía y antes del Sureste asiático. Esta selva tropical densa y compacta abarca alrededor de 1,6 millones de kilómetros cuadrados. Desde la Cumbre

de la Sostenibilidad de 2002, celebrada en Johannesburgo, funciona en la región la Asociación de los Bosques de la Cuenca del Congo (Congo Basin Forest Partnership/ CBFP), en la que trabajan una serie de organizaciones internacionales estatales y no estatales, empresas privadas e instituciones científicas, junto con representantes de los gobiernos y de instituciones locales. Su objetivo es fomentar la protección y el uso sostenible de este ecosistema sensible. El aporte describe lo que puede lograr una red política de este tipo, pero también señala sus límites.