

Forest Certification in Gabon

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ABSTRACT

Gabon has received much attention by those promoting forest certification because of its exceptional biological diversity. Because Europe is Gabon's second market following Asia, the domestic sector has taken interest in forest certification from its German, UK, Belgian and Dutch markets seriously. Located in the West Coast of the Central Africa sub-region, Gabon's forests cover 20 million hectares, which represents over four fifths of its total land area. While the forest sector only represents 4 percent of Gabon's GDP, a figure significantly overshadowed by crude oil production, the timber industry employs more people than any other private sector in Gabon and produces 4 million cubic meters of industrial round logs annually, most of it sold in international markets as round logs. All forests of Gabon are part of the national forest domain, and are the exclusive property of the state. Forest certification and debates were first introduced in Gabon in 1996 following proactive donor projects. Despite the interest from the forest sector, certification's emergence has been slow. With the exception of a certificate that was awarded and then withdrawn, to date the FSC has yet to certify any forests, while the Dutch-based Keurhout system has certified three companies, whose land areas total 1.5 million ha. However, the impact of forest certification can also be assessed by the ways its ideas of sustainable forest management have influenced governmental policy deliberations over power sharing among stakeholders, and ecological considerations of the forest ecosystems. While the present ability of forest certification to directly improve on forest management practices is still limited, an increasing number of organizations in Gabon consider forest certification as one potential tool to promote sustainable forest management.

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INTRODUCTION

Forest certification has been taken seriously in Gabon because its logging industry exports a significant amount to European markets, where purchasers of forest products have sent signals to the Gabon industry that it prefers to purchase products that it can verify were harvested in environmentally friendly ways. Although forest certification is still in its infancy in Gabon, as of the summer of 2004 it was the only country in the Congo Basin to have formally certified some of its forest operations. Perhaps more importantly, a range of stakeholders, including government and civil society actors, have been involved in forest certification processes, revealing a strong interest in shaping the direction of certification and in influencing ideas regarding sustainable forestry that certification processes develop.

For these reasons I argue that although certified forests represent a minority among timber harvesting concessions in Gabon currently, it is likely that more forest concession managers will overcome existing obstacles and move towards certification during the next few years.

Arguably the major reason for the interest in forest certification in Gabon is its exceptional forest biodiversity that covers over 20 million hectares, or four fifths of Gabon's land base. The most important forest type in Gabon, which is located in the West Coast of the Central Africa sub-region, is the natural tropical rainforest (plantations play an insignificant role). Estimates of the total number of plants species vary from 6000 to 10,000 (Lejoly 1996), while forest-dependent animal species are vitally important, with Gabon hosting 30 percent, 35 percent and 11 percent of the world populations of gorillas, chimpanzees and elephants respectively (Christy *et al.* 2003).

Gabon's 1.2 million citizens yield a low population density of 4.6 inhabitants per square kilometer, which, owing to the fact that most of the population of Gabon lives in urban areas, results in a significantly lower density on most of its land (Christy *et al.* 2003). This also means that, unlike other African nations, there is limited pressure on forestlands to have them converted to other uses such as agriculture. (Deforestation is estimated at the very low amount of 10,000 ha per year (FAO 2001)).

The economy of Gabon is dominated by the extraction and export of crude oil, which contributes over 80 percent of the Gross Domestic Product (GDP). In contrast, the contribution of the timber industry is about 4 percent of GDP. However, the timber industry provides more employment than any other industry in the private sector, employing about 28 percent of the total active population (Direction Générale des Forêts 2003). The timber industry is also the second largest source of export revenues (after oil products). With the decline in oil production in recent years, the relative importance of timber exploitation has been increasing.

Timber harvesting for exportation has a longer history in Gabon than in other countries of the sub-region. The interest of European colonizers in Gabon's timber dates from the late 1800s and has been centred on one main species, *Okoumé* (*Aucoumea klaineana*). *Okoumé* is important for its nice pink colour and for its technological properties, which make it appropriate for rotary peeling and for slicing. Also it is abundant in Gabonese forests and therefore its harvesting is economically

interesting. Perhaps because of the small size of the domestic market, industrial logging in Gabon continues to be oriented towards international export markets, mainly Asian and European markets. The major logging companies themselves are multinationals that bring with them foreign capital to Gabon's resource sectors. Most of Gabon's exports are in the form of industrial raw logs, though it does sell a limited amount of processed timber products, mainly lumber, veneer, and plywood.

Gabon is the country of the Congo Basin that has made the most quantifiable progress towards forest certification. Nevertheless, the impacts of forest certification appear to be more indirect and more related to the debate on forest certification than to the actual field implementation of forest certification. It appears that if the potentials of forest certification as a market-driven system that gives incentive to sustainable forest management are to be realized in Gabon, there must be a stronger synergy between forest certification and governmental agencies, because in Gabon, all permanent forests are under state ownership.

BACKGROUND FACTORS

Historical Context

Forestry Problems

As part of the tropical Africa region, Gabon faces a number of forestry-related challenges: the progressive reduction of forestland areas (deforestation) and the degradation of existing forests characterised by the loss of biological diversity. These problems are especially important in Gabon, which is part of the Congo Basin, the second largest block of tropical forest in the world.

In general, deforestation and forest degradation are closely associated with population pressure and poverty (ITTO 2003), which are the underlying causes of the current situation. Although there is little deforestation due to low population density in Gabon, there is, however, a problem of degradation of forest resources. The direct causes of forest degradation are:

- poor capacity of the forestry administration, resulting from the low financial resources made available;
- inadequate institutional and policy frameworks related to the low political priority given to the forestry sector, above;
- inadequate control, monitoring and enforcement of logging activities, resulting in excessive harvesting and caused by lack of trained staff and equipment and low salaries of staff, limiting recruitment of high-quality professionals and encouraging corruptive practices;
- lack of necessary preconditions (e.g. poor governance) for long-term investment by the private sector at macro and sectoral levels;
- insufficient access of local actors to information about forest management and the involvement of these actors in the decision-making process;

- inadequate scientific knowledge due to the complexity of the tropical forest ecosystem, although the available scientific information is not used adequately in forest management.

All these have contributed to, or exacerbated, unsustainable forest management practices that favour short-term tangible benefits while giving a lower value to longer-term solutions. For forest certification to be successful, it will need to address either the underlying problems or improve the institutional capacity of those who attempt to ameliorate them. Indeed, forest certification could play a large role only if it managed to enforce often un-enforced governmental regulations. However, forest certification, by itself, appears unable to address the widespread weaknesses of the existing institutional setting governing forest management.

Policy Responses

Traditionally, decisions guiding the forest sector are made by the state, through the laws and regulations such as decrees, *arrêté* and ministerial decisions. Laws are proposed by the government for adoption by the elected parliament, and after adoption, laws should be promulgated by the President of the Republic for implementation. There is no institutionalised public debate on laws before their adoption. However, informed interested parties (e.g. the logging enterprises) may express their opinions on law proposals before adoption. Some parties that are less informed (e.g. the local populations) have little say in the design of laws.

An important influential party in decision-making in the forestry sector of Gabon is the international community, especially the international financial institutions such as the World Bank (WB) and the International Monetary Fund (IMF). Low-level regulations such as ministerial decisions are rarely developed through participatory approaches. Usually these policies are designed by the technocratic officials within the Ministry and approved by the Minister. While industry does have influence through lobbying efforts, and international stakeholders through monitoring, the local populations and forest workers have no input at all. Similarly local or national NGOs are rarely invited to participate in the traditional decision-making process of Gabon, though on occasion they are kept informed of key decisions.

Since 1992 the Gabon government has undertaken a number of measures to address the forest problems identified above. These include reform of the institutional and legal framework, as well as the improvement of the technical settings of forest management (mainly the development of guidelines for forest inventories, forest management planning, and timber harvesting).

The most important reform was the adoption of a new forestry code in 2001, which devolved forest management responsibilities to private forest concession managers. However, the government simultaneously enhanced its remaining law enforcement, control, and monitoring responsibilities by requiring the managers of forest concessions to develop forest management plans and adhere to other sustainable forest management regulations concerning forest inventory and reduced impact logging.

The government also created local development initiatives (improvement of social infrastructure) with financial resources received through logging activities (Article 251), as well as promoting community forestry.

In addition, a forestry fund is being created. The forestry development fund is designed as a new mechanism to partly support costs related to sustainable forest management by a share of benefits from logging activities. The forestry development fund is to be managed by government institutions and will be used to strengthen the forestry administration.

The government of Gabon and the logging companies operating in Gabon have also received support from external donors for their efforts towards sustainable forest management. For example, the technical standards were developed and tested through a field project financed by the International Tropical Timber Organization (ITTO). Similarly the French Development Agency (AFD)¹ provided low interest loans to logging companies that were willing to improve forest management practices in their concessions. Five companies benefited from these loans.

¹(Agence Française de Développement)

Structural Features

Ownership and Tenure

Ownership and tenure are important to understanding the emergence of forest certification in Gabon for two key reasons. First, heavy state involvement means that choices over forest certification can never be devoid of state authority. Second, the reduced transaction costs associated with the government's creation of large timber leases should make it easier, everything else being equal, to support forest certification.

Government is inexorably involved in forest management, owing to the 2001 forest law (Article 13) that enshrines all forests within the national forest domain, and as the exclusive property of the state (Government of Gabon 2001). Even before 2001, the forest law did not contain provisions on communal and private forest tenure (Schmithusen 1986). The national forest domain is subdivided in two: the state permanent forest domain (permanent forests) and the rural forest domain (non-permanent forests). The permanent forests of the state include classified forests (i.e. protected areas, recreation forests, research forests, botanical and zoological gardens, state forest plantations) and registered timber production forests. Land classified as "permanent forests" cannot be converted to other land-use types such as agricultural farms, grazing lands, etc. However, lands classified as "non-permanent forests" can be cleared and converted to other land use types, if needed.

All forest exploitation requires authorisation from the forestry administration. However, local communities enjoy customary subsistence usage rights over some forest products, which are established by state regulations after consultations with the local populations. These rights usually include the use of dead wood for firewood, the felling of trees for house building, the collection of non-timber forest products (bark, latex, gum resin, fruits and nuts), the clearance of forest for subsistence agriculture, and rights of way and water usage rights.

Industrial logging takes place mostly in registered timber production forests. Individual or enterprises wishing to conduct industrial timber harvesting must obtain permits from the forestry administration. There are three types of logging permits:

- the forest concession under sustainable management (CFAD²) which can cover an area between 50,000 ha and 200,000 ha. A single logging company can be granted many CFADs; however, the cumulative area granted to one company cannot exceed 600,000 ha;
- the associated forest permits (PFA³) which can be granted exclusively to Gabon nationals. The PFA is granted for smaller forest areas not exceeding 50,000 ha. It can be managed jointly with a CFAD;
- the mutual agreement permit (PGG⁴) also granted only to Gabon nationals. It concerns cutting of fewer than 50 trees.

² “Concession Forestière sous Aménagement Durable”

³ Permis Forestier Associé

⁴ Permis de Gré à Gré

The CFAD and PFA are granted within the permanent forest estate (PFE) and are supposed to be managed in accordance with forest management plans developed by the concessionaire and approved by the forestry administration. The PGGs are granted in the rural forest domain only. In addition to the forest management plans, enterprises that apply for logging rights in a CFAD are required to develop an industrialisation plan that identifies its commitment to processing timber locally.

The procedure for granting CFADs has two stages. The first stage leads to the signing of a temporary agreement between the interested enterprise and the government of Gabon represented by the Minister of Forest Economy. The temporary agreement is valid for three years. During this time period, the applying enterprise is allowed to harvest timber while preparing a forest management plan and an industrialisation plan using the methods approved by the forestry administration. The second stage results in the final allocation of the particular CFAD by the Prime Minister to the interested enterprise by decree, provided that the forest management plan and the industrialisation plans are approved by the national committee for the industrialisation of the forestry sector. It should be noted that the granting of the above-mentioned permits does not give rights to exploit non-timber forest products (NTFPs) by the logging enterprise. Similarly, logging companies have no legal obligation to protect NTFPs in their concession. However, where it becomes necessary in the process of designing a management plan that the concessionaire is required by some stakeholders to include measures for the protection of wildlife and NTFPs, then in that case, after the management plan is approved, these additional protection measures become binding. The harvesting of these products, especially NTFPs, is subject to different types of authorisations and permits.

Normally, the logging companies have to pay two kinds of forest taxes: an area-based tax and a tax based on the value of the timber harvested. Concerning the area-based tax, the logging company should pay CFA 600 (0.91 euros or about 1.1 US\$) per ha opened to harvesting for concessions that are not yet managed on a sustainable basis in accordance with an approved forest management. Once a concession starts to

be operated on the basis of an approved forest management plan, the area-based tax is reduced to 50 percent of the value above. The value-based tax, on the other hand, relates to an official stumpage value estimated per species and according the zone where timber harvesting took place.

In Gabon currently (February 2004), 11 million ha of forestland have already been granted to 221 logging enterprises, seven million of which have been granted to big companies owned by foreign investors (mostly European and particularly French). About 50 percent of the opened areas are exploited by 13 enterprises, while the five biggest logging enterprises manage about 30 percent of all the forest permits. These companies are Rougier Océan Gabon, Leroy Gabon, Compagnie Forestière du Gabon (CFG), Compagnie Equatoriale du Bois (CEB) and Lutexfo/Soforga.

Two million hectares of forest concessions now have final decrees, while the remaining are still under temporary agreements. Most of the forests currently under temporary agreements occur in zones that are part of the rural forest domain (non-permanent forests) where PFA and PGG are granted to Gabon nationals.

The most influential logging enterprises in Gabon are part of Syndicat des Forestiers Industriels du Gabon (SYNFOGA), a national union of logging companies that is headed at the regional level by the Interafrican Forest Industries Associations (IFIA). IFIA members are active in the logging industry of several African countries including Côte d'Ivoire, Ghana, Cameroon, The Central African Republic, Congo Brazzaville, The Democratic Republic of Congo, Angola and Gabon. IFIA is assigned to represent the interests of the forest industry at the international level⁵; thus, it has been present in all discussions related to forest certification in Gabon and other African countries.

⁵ www.ifiasite.com

Markets

From the forest industry viewpoint, the forest resource base of Gabon is subdivided in two zones officially called Zone 1 and Zone 2. Zone 1 covers five million ha located along the coast in the west of the country. When forest exploitation began in the early 20th century, the easy access to the seaport of Libreville and Port-Gentil meant that forest exploitation started here, and until 1956 only occurred in this part of the country. As a consequence, forests of this zone have been overexploited and it is estimated that secondary forests account for more than 95 percent of the resource found here. The road infrastructure is more developed than in the interior of the country. Zone 1 includes the provinces of Ogoué-Maritime, Estuaire, Moyen-Ogoué, and a small part of Ngounié.

In contrast, Zone 2 covers the remainder of the country (the eastern part) and logging started there in 1956. Most of the new developments in the logging industry are now concentrated in Zone 2. An important event that helped the development of the logging industry here was the railroad, which became operational in 1981.

The production of industrial round logs from Gabon's forests is estimated to be around 4 million cubic meters (OIBT 2002), 70 percent of which is exported as raw round logs (Fomete 2003). Log processing is dominated by sawing for lumber production; however, in recent years companies have also been investing in the

production of plywood and sliced veneer (secondary processing). There are a few firms engaged in tertiary processing.

In Gabon, the Société Nationale des Bois du Gabon (SNBG) is jointly owned by the state and private shareholders and is responsible for commercialising Gabon's timber products in international markets. The SNBG tries to regulate the quantities of timber products exported in order to obtain the best prices in international markets. In the past, the SNBG concentrated its activities on *Okoumé* and *Ozogo* products, but it has now diversified to products of other species. The SNBG has a monopoly of *Okoumé* and *Ozigo* timber exports to European markets.

Timber product export plays a very important role in the logging industry of Gabon, which, as we reveal below, facilitated efforts by those promoting forest certification. The domestic market remains very small and only small artisans are interested in supplying wood products to the national market. Traditionally, Gabon timber products are exported mainly to Europe, where the main importing country is France. However, for the last 10 years Asian markets and particularly China have become more important. For example, in 2001, Gabon exported more than 2.5 million cubic meters of raw round logs, with about 45 percent of it going to China (OIBT 2002).

The main importers of timber products from Gabon are shown in Table 1 below. It can be seen that raw round logs are exported mainly to Asia, while the main destination for plywood and veneer is Europe (veneer is also exported to Canada and plywood to the United States). In addition to the figures shown in Table 1, Gabon also exports sawnwood, but in smaller quantities.

Table 1 Main destinations for timber product exports from Gabon

Round logs		Veneer		Plywood			
<i>Asia</i>		<i>Europe</i>		<i>Europe (only)</i>		<i>Europe (only)</i>	
Country	Volume (m ³)	Country	Volume (m ³)	Country	Volume (m ³)	Country	Volume (m ³)
China	1,124,660	France	415,225	France	31,985	Belgium	572
Taiwan	687,502	Portugal	114,400	Italy	2,809	Holland	5,600
Japan	40,582	Italy	44,197	Germany	2,200		
Malaysia	3,000			Belgium	1,130		
South Korea	27,000						
Hong-Kong	76,335						
Thailand	6,000						
Philippines	405						
Total	1,965,484		573,822		38,124		6,172

Source: OIBT 2002⁶

⁶ The report cited indicates that their differences in figures are related to the sources of data. The figures included in this table are from importing country sources.

THE EMERGENCE OF FOREST CERTIFICATION

Initial Support

The idea that forest certification might be used in Gabon to promote sustainable forestry originated from the international sphere, but a range of domestic stakeholders has shown interest, including government, the forest industry, and non-government organisations (NGOs).

The most important market signals in support of forest certification came from Gabon's northern European markets, particularly Germany, the Netherlands, Belgium, and the United Kingdom. There has been little demand from southern Europe, although France, Gabon's largest European market, is currently showing some interest in forest certification. Gabon's Asian markets, dominated by purchasers of industrial round logs, do not currently appear interested in certified products⁷.

Although markets provided signals to Gabon that certification was important, its actual implementation occurred only after foreign governments and non-governmental organizations developed "seed" projects to promote forest certification. One of the first of these was a one year pilot initiated in 1996 (and later extended) by WWF Belgium with financial support from the European Union (EU). The project aimed at promoting sustainable forest management through forest certification (Eba'a-Atyi and Simula 2002) in Gabon, Cameroon, and Ghana. Two key objectives were to:

1. Prepare a framework for certification in one pilot country (Cameroon) and to create and awareness in two other countries (Gabon and Ghana);
2. Improve understanding and commitment for the certification of African timber among importers/industrialists in Europe.

One of the most important aspects of the WWF/EU project for Gabon was that it facilitated the creation of a National Working Group (NWG) on forest certification (though the WWF would have liked the working group to eventually seek endorsement from the FSC, this was not a requirement of its creation). The NWG consists of 15 members representing: the forest administration (2); logging companies (2); environmental NGOs (2); local populations (2); researchers (2); training institutions (2); Ministry of Economy and Finances (1); and observers from international or regional organisations based in Libreville (2). The NWG also includes a well-trained five member technical committee. Many of the NWG's activities have been oriented toward sensitisation about the facts of forest certification and consultation among stakeholders. For example, the NWG has organised seminars and workshops on four themes (Ondo 2001, 2003): sustainable management in the forest policy of Gabon; sustainable forest management and forest certification; concepts and procedures in forest certification; criteria and indicators of sustainable forest management.

The NWG has also organised training sessions to build local capacities in forest management standard development.

⁷ Opinion expressed by the general manager of Leroy Gabon.

For these reasons the National Working Group is the most active organisation involved in awareness-raising on forest certification in Gabon. It has been successful in positioning itself as a key arena for discussions related to sustainable forest management in the country. At the same time its future is uncertain, as it has faced, and continues to face, budgetary constraints. As an independent organisation, its activities have been financed from outside through the WWF/EU project and the German government's technical cooperation development agency (GTZ).

Another problem of the NWG is that its relationship with existing certification schemes is not clear to forest operators. The WWF/EU project originated with the idea that it would promote FSC-style forest certification, which, in 1996, was the only choice for those wishing to appeal to international markets. These dynamics created the perception from the forest industry and the government that the NWG was an advocate of the FSC system. However, because the WWF/EU did not require that the NWG seek endorsement from the FSC, and because of differences within the NWG about the best way to proceed, no endorsement of any system has been sought. As a result, by the summer of 2004, the NWG activities have not led to concrete actions to implement forest certification in Gabon, but instead are situated as an important convening arena for discussion and exchanges of ideas among the Gabonese forest policy community.

Another outside influence on forest certification and sustainable forestry issues has come from the International Tropical Timber Organisation (ITTO), of which Gabon is a member. The ITTO has encouraged its member states to adopt forest certification. In fact the ITTO is a pioneer organization on the use of Criteria and Indicators (C&I) as a tool to enhance sustainable forest management. ITTO published the first set of C&I for the sustainable management of natural tropical forests just before the Rio Summit in 1992.

Although ITTO is not directly involved in promoting a particular certification system, it has undertaken a number of initiatives at the international level to promote the concept of forest certification countries (Eba'a Atyi and Simula 2002). These include:

- providing support for capacity building to its producing member countries in forest certification;
- monitoring progress in the comparability and equivalence of forest certification systems and exploring opportunities for promoting convergence in forest certification standards in member countries, including regional initiatives;
- facilitating discussions involving stakeholders and providing support for exploring the feasibility of a phased approach to certification as a means of improving equitable access to certification by producers in producing and consuming member countries;
- recognising the potential contribution of forest management and chain of custody certification to the control of illegal logging and illegal trade of tropical timber;

- facilitating dialogue and cooperation between consuming and producing countries, and educating stakeholders and the general public about the principles and complexities of sustainable forest management and the certification of natural and planted forests;
- promoting enabling conditions for sustainable forest management and its certification in its member countries;
- supporting research to examine the effectiveness and efficiency of alternative sets of indicators for satisfying specific certification criteria and clarifying the impact of certification on sustainable forest management;
- keeping its members informed on initiatives related to international frameworks for mutual recognition between certification systems; and
- providing support to regional certification and related organizations in the tropical regions.

In Gabon specifically, the ITTO has organised a training session on the development of Principles, Criteria and Indicators (PCI) that can be used in forest certification, as well as holding a regional workshop on phased approaches to forest certification (Simula *et al.* 2003). All these events have contributed to raising awareness about forest certification, particularly at the level of government institutions.

Another key external source of influence in the development of certification in Gabon has been provided by the Keurhout Foundation. The Keurhout Foundation was created as an Act of the Dutch parliament specifically designed for timber products exported to the Netherlands. It defines the minimum requirements for the certification of wood products and sustainable forest exploitation. The Keurhout Foundation approves certificates and declarations made by accredited certification bodies if it is the opinion of its panel of experts that these fulfil its own criteria. The minimum requirements of the Keurhout Foundation draw on the ITTO's definition of sustainable forest management, the Forest Principles (UNCED), and the FSC principles.

Finally, a fourth source of influence is found at the intergovernmental arenas where a heightened interest in moving toward forest certification has occurred. One example is the 1999 sub-regional initiative of the Heads of State from Central Africa (Cameroon, The Republic of Congo, Gabon, Equatorial Guinea, Central African Republic, The Democratic Republic of Congo and Chad), which held a summit in Yaoundé, Cameroon on the conservation and sustainable management of tropical forests (COMIFAC 2003). In their final declaration (now often referred to as the "Yaoundé Declaration"), the Heads of State committed their countries to adopting harmonised national forest policies and accelerating the implementation of forest management tools. They specifically noted the need to have the states of Central Africa approve and promote the development of internationally recognized, harmonised forest certification systems, and to provide resources for their implementation. Even though it was not clear whether this declaration envisioned

that a regional certification system be developed, the declaration strongly influences the forestry administration in Gabon, which signalled its support for the idea of forest certification and committed resources to development of a certification standard and capacity building. (It is worth noting that the Yaoundé Summit was partly initiated by WWF, which may have influenced the declaration's attention to forest certification).

Institutional Design

Institutional design varies across the two forest certification systems that operate in Gabon, the FSC and the Dutch Keurhout system. The African Timber Organization (ATO) undertook a feasibility study to set up a regional certification system in Africa in 2003 (including Gabon) to be called Pan African Forest Certification (PAFC), but as of the winter of 2005 the institutional setting of PAFC in Gabon were still being finalised.

The institutional processes within the FSC (and to a lesser extent Keurhout) can be distinguished by their international frameworks, their domestic processes, and their appeals functions.

At the international level, both the FSC and Keurhout have procedures established outside Gabon that establish governance structures and broad principles and criteria to which all countries must adhere. The FSC, as noted in the introduction to this book, has created 10 principles and criteria governing a range of globally important forestry issues including indigenous rights, sustainable forest management, community involvement, and so on.

The FSC requires that a national working group develop specific indicators and verifiers in accordance with the 10 principles and criteria. The FSC does not require that a national working group vote according to the one-third format of the international body, leaving much rule-making discretion to domestic FSC national working group participants. The FSC does require, however, that half the members of a national working group be FSC members. Gabon's current working group falls far short of this requirement, which partly explains why they have not sought FSC approval.

In the absence of formally approved standards developed by national working groups, the FSC provides for a provisional process in which an auditing company develops temporary standards. These temporary standards tend not to follow the same type of open consultation process and limit local participation. It was these very dynamics that led to the controversy surrounding Leroy-Gabon (discussed below), where concerned national and local actors were not part of the process that led to its certification. Keurhout's domestic process is very limited – other than logging enterprises, there is limited public participation over issuing of Keurhout certificates.

Both the FSC and Keurhout systems require that the decision to issue a certificate be made in a transparent fashion. Reports of the assessment and monitoring missions must be made available to the general public and interested parties are permitted to provide comments. Both the Keurhout Foundation and FSC have established an appeal panel for those who oppose the granting of a certificate. Such processes

provide redress, especially when dealing with the awarding of provisional certificates. For example, following the 1996 awarding of an FSC certificate to the forest company Leroy Gabon, a range of organisations was able to appeal and a second assessment resulted in the certificate being withdrawn (see Box 1 on page 461).

Transparency is also encouraged by the contribution of forestry experts, which is often much broader in the case of certification than in governmental processes because certification processes invite experts from outside the certification systems, whereas the Gabon government almost always relies on its internal government technicians. For example, during the process of development of standards for sustainable forest management by the African Timber Organization (ATO) – these standards can be used for forest certification – experts came not only from local governments but also from international NGOs, universities, research institutes and consultancies.

Clearly then the institutional settings of certification systems require broader participation of stakeholders and are more transparent than the traditional government-led decisionmaking processes. However, two caveats should be noted. First, the domestic certification participatory processes are constrained and directed by general frameworks developed outside of Gabon. The only recourse Gabonese stakeholders would have to alter these frameworks would be at the international level where it would require outreach, in the case of the FSC, to other members of the general assembly.

Standards

Discussions on appropriate certification standards in Gabon take place within the Keurhout Foundation, the Forest Stewardship Council (FSC) and the harmonised ATO/ITTO standards. One of the arguments for the promotion of forest certification in Gabon was that traditional governmental approaches do not sufficiently address ecological and social problems governing forest management. And even when appropriate policies are in place, the forestry administration often lacked the resources to implement and enforce them. For these reasons deliberations in Gabon over forest certification expressly addressed and developed social and ecological requirements.

FSC

FSC offers the only existing global set of standards that was explicitly elaborated to function as a reference for certification of forest management: the FSC Principles and Criteria (P&C). However, Gabon has not developed national FSC-endorsed standards. Even the existing National Working Group (NWG) does not meet the requirements to be recognised as a FSC NWG. As has been done in other countries without FSC endorsed standards, it is likely that, if a forest concessionaire in Gabon were interested in obtaining an FSC certificate, a certification body (e.g. SmartWood) would have to make the assessment using their own interim standards.

Keurhout

Keurhout uses four general minimum requirements:

- forest management should demonstrate that enough attention is given to the integrity of ecological functions and to the continuity of economic, social and cultural functions of the forest based on intrinsic criteria and indicators;
- the forest managing enterprises should have an appropriate management system;
- the certification body is independent and meets international guidelines related to organisation and monitoring procedures, and professional competence in forest management;
- procedures followed in the transportation of timber products concerning the separation of products from different sources should be reliable and transparent.

The first general requirement is further subdivided into principles (3), criteria (3 for each principle) and indicators that are not numbered (www.stichtingkeurhout.nl, 2002.)

ATO/ITTO PCI

In addition to the FSC and Keurhout, it is important to note that a third system of sustainable forestry standards, known as the ATO/ITTO process, has emerged. This system was designed to address tropical forestry operations in Africa, and *permits*, rather than requires, companies to be audited for compliance. These standards depart from the FSC and Keurhout in that governmental agencies were heavily involved in their creation and development. The ATO/ITTO Principles and Criteria merged from two distinct processes. The first originated from the African Timber Organization, which is an organisation of 15 countries within tropical Africa, including Gabon.

Based in Libreville⁸, the main objective of ATO is to harmonise forest policies within its member countries. ATO was supported financially by the EU and technically by the Center for International Forestry Research (CIFOR), and applied CIFOR methodologies in standard setting (Prabhu *et al.* 1998). These methodologies consisted of using existing standards established by other organisations, and then selecting and reformulating these based on the results of field tests. Initial tests were conducted in Côte d'Ivoire (1995), Cameroon (1996), Gabon (1998), the Central African Republic (1998) and Ghana (1999-2000). The tests consist of a panel of international, regional and national experts conducting a field assessment and auditing logging companies' forest practices according to the pre-established criteria. The results are then discussed during workshops with a broad participation of representatives of forest management stakeholders (ATO 1999).

Recognizing that both ITTO (see introductory chapter to this volume) and ATO have adopted similar strategies in promoting sustainable forest management through

⁸ The capital city of Gabon

the implementation of PCI, a decision was adopted during the 29th Session of the International Tropical Timber Council in November 2000 calling for collaboration between ATO and ITTO. A study was conducted to refine the ATO PCIs and make them consistent with the ITTO C&I. The two organisations have now published a common standard known as the *ATO/ITTO Principles, Criteria and Indicators for the Sustainable Management of African Natural Tropical Forests* (ATO and ITTO 2003). The harmonised ATO/ITTO PCI are applicable at both the national level and the Forest Management Unit (FMU) level. An innovative feature of the ATO/ITTO PCI is the inclusion of sub-indicators, which provide a basis for the development of specific verifiers and standards of performance relevant to the assessment of sustainable forest management at the FMU level in African tropical forests.

This generic standard at the national level consists of 1 principle, 5 criteria, 33 indicators and 45 sub-indicators. The PCI at the national level are designed mainly to assess forest policy at the country level, and therefore cannot be used for forest certification in the field.

At the FMU level, the standard consists of 3 principles, 15 criteria, 57 indicators and 140 sub-indicators. The three principles of the FMU level include aspects related to:

- sustainable supply of forest goods and services;
- the maintenance of ecological functions;
- the contribution of the forest to the improvement of the economic and social well being of workers in the FMU and of local populations.

Whether and how these criteria may be applied in the context of non-governmental forest certification initiatives remain to be seen. Any analysis of forest certification in Gabon must carefully assess the influence of the ATO/ITTO process on the role that governments might eventually play, on the role of increased transparency, and on the ideas that are considered legitimate and appropriate within the forest certification context.

THE REACTION TO CERTIFICATION

Forest Policy Community and Stakeholders

During the 1990s the majority of decision makers of the forestry sector in Gabon had a negative perception of forest certification. In general, government officers perceived forest certification as a competitive phenomenon designed to limit the power of the state over the management of forest resources and an indirect way to decrease the national sovereignty on the countries' natural resources for the interest of foreign forces. This opinion especially related to the FSC system, which, from the forestry administration standpoint, was dominated by international NGOs at the expense of government institutions. Administration officers and most logging companies saw forest certification as an approach that questioned the position of the state as the owner of forestlands and forest resources.

The reasons for this initial negative perception of forest certification by government policy makers were partly related to the low level of information that forest officers had at their disposal, and especially because it was introduced by international NGOs (particularly WWF). However the fact that governmental officials and agencies could not be part of the FSC process also increased governmental animosity toward forest certification. In addition, the arrival of certification coincided with a time of great political upheaval, as Gabon moved from a one-party monolithic system to multi-party system, often marred by violence. This upheaval led state officers to fear a loss of control over natural resources, which made them view another private arena with suspicion.

However, since 1999 government decision makers' attitudes toward forest certification improved greatly as they learned more about its objectives and procedures. Indeed, some government officials have noted the positive effects that certification may have on the implementation of national laws.⁹ Still, for the most part the perception still exists that forest certification must do a better job of taking into consideration the economic, political, ecological and social environment of Gabon.

Conversely, domestic NGOs were very enthusiastic about forest certification at the beginning,¹⁰ as they perceived forest certification as a means that would allow them to monitor logging activities. As the process of forest certification in most cases requires a great deal of transparency from the logging enterprise, local NGOs felt they could gain an increased role in Gabon's logging activities. However, as the FSC has yet to gain many commitments in Gabon, the enthusiasm of national NGOs has decreased over time (see also Box 1). The reaction from the local communities has been virtually nonexistent possibly because of a very low level of information about forest certification and related procedures.

Forest Owners

As indicated previously, forests assigned for sustainable timber production in Gabon are owned by the state. However, private individuals or companies, most of which are European, manage most of the forestland, rendering their attitudes toward forest certification extremely important.

The forest management and logging companies reacted in two different ways at the beginning (during the 1990s). A few companies, such as Leroy Gabon and Thanry Gabon, immediately embraced forest certification. These companies saw it as a strategy to gain a better competitive edge and market position, as most of their business was oriented towards international markets in general and European markets in particular. Other companies, including BORDAMUR and LUTEXO-SOFORGA, were rather sceptical about the need to adopt forest certification.

The most illustrative case of companies that immediately became open to forest certification is Leroy Gabon. This company developed its strategy for an FSC certification very early (see Box 1). Leroy's strategy included the establishment of forest research plots, forest inventory and the setting of written guidelines for the sustainable management of forest resources within its concession (ISOROY 1996).

⁹ From discussions with M. Nzenguema, Director for Inventory and Forest Management planning unit of the Ministry of Forest Economy.

¹⁰ Personal communication, Constant Alogo and Omer Ntougou, two domestic NGO directors.

Then, they had an audit conducted by SGS QUALIFOR UK, and a FSC certificate was granted to Leroy Gabon in 1996. However, the certificate was later withdrawn due to action by some national and international NGOs who complained about the validity of the certificate.

The opposition of the NGOs was based on three points: 1) poor stakeholder consultation; 2) lack of a forest management plan; and 3) the presence of a protected area near the logging concession. Some also argued that the certificate should not have been issued before the government of Gabon had completed the reforms of the legal and institutional framework of the forestry sector. Irrespective of these important issues, the withdrawal of the FSC certificate contributed to the negative opinion that some actors in the forest industry have towards forest certification, including the view that it may work to reduce Gabon's timber exports, rather than facilitate them.

The impact of the Leroy Gabon withdrawal was significant in dousing the interest of other companies in pursuing FSC-style forest certification. For example, the forest company Thanry Gabon, which had been preparing for FSC certification, gave up its efforts after learning of the Leroy Gabon case. Nevertheless, preparations for certification did result in important changes in companies like Thanry Gabon, in their efforts to prepare for, and think about, how to promote and address the FSC's requirements of sustainable forest management. For example, each of the above-mentioned companies created a forest management planning unit within its administrative chart and recruited trained forest technician or contracted international consultancy firms specialised in forest management to assist with the development of forest management plans. As a result of these changes and positive disposition towards certification in principle, Leroy Gabon and Thanry turned to, and received recognition from, the Keurhout certification system.

Despite this initial interest on the part of some forest companies, most Gabonese forest companies were lukewarm about forest certification from the beginning. They were leery of the costs of forest certification, and skeptical of the promises of the higher prices they would achieve in international markets. In addition, the demand for certified products was negligible, as only a very small share of the European market influenced by NGOs was sensitive to environmental issues concerning tropical forests. Simultaneous rapid development of Asian markets, which provided no signals for certified products, also provided an option to avoid bearing the costs of certification. Meeting the legal requirements of the government of Gabon as it related to sustainable forest management appeared to be enough. These companies were waiting for a much stronger signal from the market before they would move towards certification.

Another reaction came from the Union of Logging Companies (IFIA). To address the worries of some of its members that forest certification would result in a de facto ban on Gabon's timber exports, the IFIA proposed a code of conduct that would engage its member companies in making progress towards forest certification. IFIA's code of conduct includes four chapters: Forest management; Rational valorisation of forests; Local processing of timber; and Cooperation with all actors and improvement of the living conditions of local people.

Each of the four chapters is further subdivided into articles. For example, the chapter on forest management is subdivided into 9 articles stating the commitment of member companies to:

- recognise the need to care for forests and to find an appropriate balance between economic and ecological concerns;
- respect the laws of the states in which the operations are conducted;
- respect recognised traditional rights;
- contribute to the fight against poaching;
- minimise the impacts of logging on ecologically important sites through Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA) studies and planning of forest operations;
- define protection sites within the managed concessions for timber production;
- contribute, in collaboration with national institutions and specialised NGOs, to the training of employees;
- call in governments, donors and local populations to concert in order to slow down forest clearing;
- call on all partners to contribute to the sustainable management of tropical forests.

Box 1 Controversies over an FSC certificate in Gabon: the Leroy-Gabon case

Leroy Gabon (hereafter called Leroy) is one of the companies of the multinational business holding ISOROY, a leading manufacturer of plywood in Europe. Leroy is among of the most important business enterprises in the forest industry of Gabon. Leroy currently manages a forest concession covering 578,910 ha and runs a sawmill and a plywood factory. Leroy seems to have a long-term view for its logging business in Gabon, as it has created a forest management plan to cover its activities for the next 30 years. The forest management plan of Leroy's concession was approved by the government of Gabon in 1993.

Leroy is a pioneer among forestry enterprises concerning forest certification in Gabon and even in the Central Africa sub-region. After the Earth Summit in Rio (1992), Leroy started developing a strategy for the eco-labelling of its forest management practices. The concession of Leroy consisted then of 4 lots, labelled lot 28, lot 30, lot 32 and lot 36 and covering 75,000 ha, 105,000 ha, 105,000 ha, and 88,000 ha respectively. In 1993, Leroy contributed to the installation of a multidisciplinary research team inside its concession. The research team carried out multiple-resource forest inventories (fauna and

flora) and studies on the impacts of logging operations and forest regeneration. In addition a unit was established for climate monitoring. In 1996, Leroy published its charter of “EUROKOUME,” a written commitment to manage its forest concessions sustainably and comply with FSC principles and criteria. At that time, the government of Gabon had just started reflecting on the revision of its forest legislation, which would be finalised in 2002. The creation of forest management plans was not yet mandatory for forest concessions managers as is the case now.

In 1996, Leroy had not yet developed a comprehensive management plan. However, with the results of the forest inventory and its written commitment to implement sustainable forest management, Leroy commanded a certification audit from SGS QUALIFOR UK. The auditors considered that, even though there was no management plan, there were a number of documents available which together were equivalent to a management plan. As pointed out by a former director of QUALIFOR who took office after the audit had been conducted, “This would not be unique – Swedes do not have a single ‘management plan’ and nor do many UK forests which are nevertheless certified.” The audit was conclusive and a FSC certificate was awarded to Leroy for lots 28 and 30.

After the decision of QUALIFOR to award a certificate to Leroy Gabon had been made public, three national NGOs based in Gabon, CIAJE (Comité Inter-Associations Jeunesse Environnement) and Amis de la Nature et Environnement, and Amis du Pangolin opposed the certificate. They were supported at the international level by Rettet den Regenwald, a German-based NGO member of FSC. According to Constant Alogho, who was the Director of CIAJE at that time, the national NGOs first complained to the government of Gabon without success, because Leroy was too powerful inside Gabon. They later sent their complaints to SGS QUALIFOR and the FSC with the help of their international associates.

Their criticisms: in their opinion, there was no stakeholder consultation. None of these NGOs was consulted by QUALIFOR during the audits. However, some other interested parties such as the current chairperson of the NWG on sustainable forest management admit that they were consulted but did not have a strong opinion against the certification process; In their opinion, there was no management plan. In fact Leroy had included a simplified management plan in its EUROKOUME charter, but the opinion of the NGOs was that such a plan was not enough. They would have preferred that the forestry administration first adopt guidelines for writing forest management plans. Such guidelines would be used to assess the quality of forest management plans elaborated by private companies. Lot 32 of the concession of Leroy was partly overlapping with the Lopé Reserve, a protected area for fauna.

At the behest of leaders of the national NGOs, QUALIFOR suggested putting the certificate on hold until the issues raised could be resolved, but some NGOs would not accept such a proposal. However, one of the NGOs

(Amis du Pangolin) changed its position and became favourable to maintaining the certificate, which, according to its director, would have permitted national NGOs to continue the monitoring of logging practices by Leroy. Because the enterprise had committed itself to the certification process, it had become transparent towards civil society, and national NGOs could visit its operations. At the end the certificate was simply withdrawn.

Controversies over the Leroy certificate had some impacts on the process of forest certification in Gabon in general. The current negative opinion that the forest industry has of the FSC certification system is partly due to the case of Leroy. The industry (not only Leroy, but their union and IFIA) became convinced that the NGOs are more powerful than other stakeholders within the FSC system. The failure of Leroy has incited private companies interested in forest certification to turn to other certification schemes (especially Keurhout) or to support efforts to establish a regional forest certification scheme. Another consequence of the Leroy case is that private companies have become more reluctant to allow the involvement of NGOs in the management of their concessions. In fact the national NGOs that took part in the Leroy inquiry have not been active in forest certification since then. As the Director¹¹ of Amis du Pangolin puts it: “When Leroy had an FSC certificate it was possible to enter the company and assess its operations, but once the certificate was withdrawn, the doors of Leroy became closed to national NGOs”. The position of Rettet den Regenwald, which was seen as radical by the logging company union and by Amis du Pangolin, may have contributed to the perception by some actors that forest certification aims at banning the international trade of timber products exported from Gabon and other countries of the Congo Basin.

¹¹ Omer Ntougou

The problem faced by IFIA through its code of conduct was that it had no strategy for communicating the results of compliance with the world outside the logging industry. Furthermore, compliance with the code of conduct was hard to see as a credible way to assess progress towards sustainable forest management because the assessment was made only by forest managers themselves. Recently IFIA has joined another initiative to develop an independent system of monitoring the compliance of the private logging sector to their commitments towards sustainable management of forest resources in Central Africa. This initiative is launched by logging companies, NGOs (especially Global Forest Watch and the World Resources Institute) and the World Bank. It is proposed that the results of the monitoring be published periodically over the Internet after an independent third party verification component verifies the accuracy of data received from the private sector.

Current Status of Forestland Certification

Certified forests in Gabon cover about 1.5 million ha from three companies: Thanry Gabon (CEB with 580,490 ha), Rougier (CFG with 287,951 ha) and Leroy¹² (578,910 ha).

¹² After the withdrawal of the FSC certificate, Leroy Gabon was audited a few years later within the Keurout system and obtained a Keurhout certificate that is still valid.

All three companies have certificates endorsed by the Keurhout system and issued by “Form Ecology,” a certification auditing firm based in the Netherlands. All the three companies are considered to be large-scale operations.

The companies chose Keurhout because it appears to have a more flexible approach than the FSC, giving firmer input and more local context in which forests are managed in Gabon (INDUFOR and FRM 2003). Most logging companies are rather critical about the FSC system. Representatives of the industry feel the FSC approach would ultimately lead to effective boycotting of African timber in the European market. This opinion results from the action of NGOs that are influential within the FSC system. For example, Greenpeace’s campaign to promote a moratorium of industrial wood production and other industrial development activities in the zones with pristine and intact forests and other key forests from the ecological viewpoint was seen a major cause of concern (INDOFOR 2002). This is because such definitions and information are viewed by companies as being biased against economic utilisation of these forests. According to forest industry representatives, as long as there are no agreed definitions for such forests, the application of a moratorium could easily become arbitrary. Within the same campaign context, Greenpeace¹³ seems to be advocating that public procurement of wood and paper should be limited to products which come from certified sustainable sources and which are certified by FSC. This, according to the industry, shows the relationship between the FSC and advocates of logging bans in areas such as the Congo Basin.

¹³ www.greenpeace.org (2002)

Smaller companies managing PFAs and CGGs have asserted that it is difficult not only to adopt forest certification, but also even to change their forest management approach to meet the requirements of sustainable forest management as set by the forestry administration. They are often local entrepreneurs who are weakly organised and who have little experience in other forest management operations than logging. In addition, their resource use rights may be short term and therefore their interest in sustainability is limited. However, some of them are arranging partnerships with bigger multinational companies, and this may provide an opportunity to progress towards sustainability.

Current Status of the Certified Marketplace

The companies that manage certified forests produce about 400,000 cubic meters of logs annually (which represents about 10 percent of the total round log production of the country). Part of this is processed in the country and the rest is exported as industrial round logs. All the certified timber products are now sold easily in Europe. Although the prices are not affected, it is believed that the demand for certified products is currently higher than the supply in European markets (Parker 2004). However, given the rapid growth of Asian markets, which are less sensitive to certification, and the fact that there is no price premium for certified products in most European markets, the timber industry may not be inclined to move faster toward forest certification.

EFFECTS OF CERTIFICATION

Because there is only one forest certification system implemented in Gabon, and the system uses a minimum requirement approach (not significantly different from legal requirements), forest certification seems to have made limited direct impact on both the management of forests and the marketing of timber in Gabon. In addition, it is difficult to isolate the effects of forest certification from those of policy changes that have occurred in Gabon during the last ten years. However, the opinion in this paper is that beyond getting forestland certified, the whole debate around forest certification has impacted the forestry sector of Gabon positively in recent years.

Power

Among the stakeholders in forest management in Gabon, it is mainly the logging industry and the forestry administration that are well informed about forest certification. The other stakeholders, such as workers and the local populations, have had very little say in forest certification in the case of Gabon, as they did not participate in the standard-setting process and the only certification system implemented in concessions (Keurhout) does not insist much on social aspects. This may be inherent in the implementation of the certification system, which basically does not require much more commitment in some aspects than what the government requires through its legislation.

In Gabon, the power structure continues to be influenced primarily by the state. However, as a result of forest certification, the logging companies are becoming more active in the dialogue with the government in the quest for sustainable forest management. The local populations are also getting more involved in forest management (including in the management of forest concessions not yet interested by certification), mainly in the area of benefits sharing. However, it is difficult to say whether the increased involvement of the local populations relates to forest certification, because the new state regulations also require more consensual decision-making involving the local populations when drafting forest management plans.

Forest certification, in combination with other factors, may have contributed to improved governance in the forestry sector. In fact, logging companies that are involved in forest certification have made considerable efforts to monitor and document forest management practices and activities (Bayol 2003a). These companies are more open to showing their legal records to outside parties such as NGOs and are keen to cooperate with national and international organisations interested in promoting sustainable forest management. This, for example, is the case for Thanry Gabon, which has established a partnership with the national branch of WWF to promote the involvement of local communities in forest management (see Box 2). Similarly, Rougier Gabon kept contact with WCS and WWF during the development of the management plan of the forest concession of Haut-Abanga (Bayol 2003b). The openness in the attitude of the companies has promoted a similar attitude from the forestry administration, which has become more ready to discuss

forest law enforcement with external actors. However, it should be emphasised that forest certification started in Gabon at the same time as a more comprehensive effort was made to improve governance by the national government with the support of international organisations and donor countries. For example, as noted above, during the last 10 to 15 years the political context has been progressing towards a more democratic system with multiple political parties.

It is difficult to say how much the advent of forest certification has influenced the reforms made in the forestry sector of Gabon during the 1990s when certification was introduced. Many other initiatives to improve forest management practices in Gabon were being implemented at the international level at the same time. For example, the ITTO, within its Objective 2000, supported the efforts of Gabon by financing pilot projects designed to improve the technical settings of forest management in Gabon. Similarly, the World Bank supported the government of Gabon in the drafting of a Forest Sector Programme and encouraged the country to revise the institutional and legal framework of forest management to make sustainable development in the sector possible. Nevertheless, the officers of the Ministry of Forest Economy of the government of Gabon recognize that the perspective of forest certification by international non-government bodies has contributed to the adoption of policy orientations favourable to sustainable forest management. The government feared the negative publicity that would result from failure to certify Gabon's forest concessions due to lack of technical and regulatory tools to support sustainable forest management. Forest certification appears to be one of the factors that have pushed forest policy decision makers to define new technical and legal standards for the management of forest resources in Gabon.

Social

In Gabon, the presence of the logging companies in remote rural areas has always been associated with some contribution to local development. In the past, logging companies contributed to the construction and maintenance of the road infrastructure, which was used both to transport harvested timber products and for local development. Each logging company, depending on its location, builds a school for the employees' children and a health centre. This continues to be done, but nowadays logging companies also contribute to local development through direct financial resources put at the disposal of local communities who are required to set up local development committees for the management of such funds. The local committees determine development priorities and design small projects to be financed by the annual contributions received from logging companies. The amounts of these financial contributions are determined as part of the contract agreed upon during the development of the forest management plan. This new approach stems from the forestry laws adopted in 2002 (Article 251). However, forest certification has made the process more transparent and companies that have certificates are more open to showing records of their contribution to local development. For example, CEB (or Thanry Gabon), which is one of the companies managing a certified forest concession, has involved WWF and a social scientist of the Omar Bongo University

in the management of funds allocated to local development. CEB has also helped organising committees to represent the local communities in negotiations related to local development issues, and has contributed to local capacity building through the training of local extension agents (see Box 2).

Another important social aspect of forest management that has changed recently is the definition of user rights for forest resources in which the local communities are now more involved. Once more, the law has provisions about the involvement of the local populations in the definitions of the traditional usage rights, but companies managing certified forests tend to encourage true participation from the local populations and thus, there are fewer conflicts with traditional authorities.

Economic

The most important beneficiaries of forest certification in economic terms have been the national government and the local communities. Government officials have explained that there appears to be an improvement in taxation revenues from the certified companies – though more research needs to be done, such companies not only appear to pay the expected taxes at a higher rate than non-certified companies, but they also take initiative to settle their tax bill on time.¹⁴ They also reveal greater transparency by sharing their tax records. Similarly, local communities are receiving income for local development as agreed, although the real impact of these revenues on the rural development remains weak as shown in the case of CEB (Box 2). The weak impacts of the revenues provided by the logging companies for local development relate more to the lack of community capacity to adequately design and implement local development projects.

The companies have supported not only direct costs related to forest certification, but also indirect costs of upgrading their management system. It is the opinion of these companies that they have not received sufficient benefits to meet the costs endured. Even access to new markets has not been experienced. This probably relates to the fact that the only system adopted by companies operating in Gabon is only recognized in the Netherlands. In fact, these Keurhout-certified companies adopted the system to maintain their market in the Netherlands. The companies hope that with time, as the markets become more sensitive, they will have a competitive advantage. However, because the Asian markets are gaining in importance, this envisaged market advantage from certification may be delayed.

¹⁴ Opinion expressed by the Director of the Forestry Department within the Ministry of Forest Economy, Water, Fisheries in charge of Environment and Nature Protection.

Box 2 Financing local development through revenues from logging: the case of CEB in Gabon

The *Compagnie Equatoriale du Bois* (CEB) is a logging company that belongs to the French multinational business The Thanry Group. The Thanry Group is involved in the forest industry in almost all the countries of Central Africa including Cameroon, The Republic of Congo, The Central African Republic, and Gabon.

In Gabon, CEB manages 580,490 ha of forests in the Okondja Region. CEB was the first logging company to possess an approved forest management plan and to complete a certification process within the Keurhout system. In anticipation of the forest certification process, CEB started to experiment with a new approach to benefit sharing with the local populations. The approach consists of providing financial resources to local communities living around the plots where timber harvesting takes place. The company allocates CFA 1,000 (about US\$2) for each cubic meter of timber harvested to the development of the neighbouring community.

The experience concerns 18 villages along the Okondja-Akiene road. When the program started, CEB gave cash amounts to the communities. But it was noted that a year later no change had been made in the community infrastructure. The local community members shared the money among themselves, and the money was used in a rather consumptive way by each person or family. Then, after consultation with the local populations, it was decided that CEB would open a bank account where the revenues allocated to local development would be deposited. The community members would first identify ideas for micro projects that would improve the living conditions of the whole community. Once a project was agreed upon, CEB would transfer the corresponding amount to community members. WWF offered to assist the communities in the identification of micro-projects including the assessment of their feasibility. Project ideas put forth by the communities included the construction of social infrastructure such as primary schools, infirmaries, installations for the supply of clean water, and churches, but also transport buses and the building of bars and the installation of television antennas. Some project ideas were rejected as being too costly or non-viable in the opinion of the advisers from WWF and CEB. It became necessary for each of the communities to establish a committee that would ensure the follow-up of the implementation of the project and maintain dialogue with CEB and the forestry administration. In addition, WWF trained extension agents among local community members to facilitate the participation of the whole community in the implementation of the project. On its side, CEB hired a specialist to deal with local communities.

According to the consultant¹⁵ contracted by CEB to help design its social policy, at this point micro-projects have been successful in only six villages. In the other villages, failures have come from disputes among villagers about

¹⁵ Mrs. Rose Ondo, a social scientist from the Omar Bongo University.

power sharing among community members, mismanagement of revenues by members of the project management committees or poor monitoring and follow-up once WWF has left. However, it is hoped that problems that have been encountered are part of the learning process. CEB started its policy only in 2000 and it will take more time for the local community to improve their capacity and skills for small-scale project management. It should be recalled that the cutting cycle practiced by logging companies is 30 years, which gives more time to ameliorate the benefit-sharing mechanisms.

Environmental

Certification may have its greatest impact on forest management practices: all of the companies that have entered the certification process have changed their forest management practices. One of the most important aspects of these changes is on planning of forest management operations. Each of the concerned companies has designed a forest management plan with a cutting cycle of 30 to 40 years. The plans contain calculations of the annual allowable cut based not only on the inventory of the growing stock, but also on projections based on growth and mortality rates of the species and the estimates of logging damage. The forest concessions have been carefully mapped and subdivided in blocks to be harvested each year. Planning also concerns the forest road system.

Similarly, the companies that have obtained certificates have included special measures for nature conservation and protection of the environment. The practice is to set aside some nature or biodiversity conservation areas within the forest concession. Regulations to fight poaching within the concession have been introduced and workers face sanctions when found to be hunting for bushmeat.¹⁶

Nevertheless, the reasons for all these changes should also be attributed to the new legislation, although companies with certificates started innovating even before the new forest law was adopted.

¹⁶ From discussions with forest managers of CEB Thanry, Leroy Gabon and SBL, these regulations are posted in head offices of these companies.

CONCLUSION

Summary

The overall impression is that certification has started in Gabon as a result of the sensitisation launched by a few organisations. A few companies reacted ahead of others, but it is likely that during the next five years there will be more companies engaged in forest certification in response to the growth of the international markets for certified products. An increasing number of organisations in Gabon consider forest certification as a potential tool to promote sustainable forest management in the country and to improve the access of Gabon's timber and wood products to the environmentally sensitive markets, especially in Europe and North America. Additional incentives to join forest certification will come from initiatives such the

Forest Legislation Enforcement and Governance (FLEG), which are being pushed by the donor countries.

However, the problem of the choice among forest certification systems needs to be addressed. Currently, companies interested in certification have moved toward Keurhout, which is a limited option because it is specific to the Netherlands. Many actors in forest management in Gabon are still very critical of the FSC system, which they think does not take into account the specific environment of the country.

The capability of forest certification alone to improve on forest management practices is still limited. This is particularly so because forest certification has been approached until now as a non-state process that generates pressure on forest managers from the market, and in Gabon new developing markets in Asia are not sensitive enough to environmental issues. Thus, the expected pressure from the market may not be enough to encourage the adoption of sustainable forest management practices by forest concession managers. Even traditional markets for Gabon's timber products in Europe do not yet seem sufficiently demanding of certified timber products. The situation in Gabon may apply to the case of most countries of the Congo Basin.

In addition, there are many other factors that encourage unsustainable use of forest resources (flora and fauna) that are currently out of reach of forest certification. This is the case with the oil industry, which has been linked with poaching in Gabon (Thibault and Blaney 2003), or the fact that Gabon's economy is based mostly on extractive resources, some of which are found in the natural forests, such as timber and bushmeat (Wunder 2003).

Therefore, provided the end result sought by forest certification is the adoption of sustainable forest management practices by forest resources managers, forest certification should be part of a more comprehensive approach that also includes state policy reforms and international donor policies and legislation.

Roadblocks and Challenges

The most important challenge that promoters of forest certification in Gabon have had to face is the acceptance of forest certification as a complementary tool for the promotion of sustainable forest management. Related to this are difficulties in raising awareness about forest certification amongst all stakeholders. These challenges are confronted by efforts at sensitisation made through NGOs, involving training programs designed for different stakeholders and particularly oriented towards forest administration officers. However, the most important strategy for the promotion of forest certification is certainly the development of environmentally sensitive markets in Europe, which in turn has created a more dynamic vision among logging enterprises in Gabon, which are almost completely dependent on international markets.

Another important challenge yet to be met is dissociating forest certification from the extreme views relating it to the boycott of African timber products in international markets. Forest certification still faces a great deal of suspicion from economic interests in forest management who see it as another approach to try to enforce a ban on tropical timber products from Africa in international markets.

Future Development

The FSC has now established a regional office in the neighbouring Cameroon, which may bring about changes during the coming years in Gabon and the Central Africa sub-region. The FSC office established in Cameroon aims at promoting FSC certification in the Central Africa sub-region (which includes Gabon) by establishing a network of contact persons, setting FSC national working groups in countries such as Gabon and improving its communication strategy (Boetekees 2002). It is likely that during the coming five years, some of the logging companies will enter the FSC certification system, but in the mid-term these will still be a minority.

Logging companies that have long-established experience in logging operations in Gabon, as well as forestry administrations, local NGOs and forest management service companies, are advocating for the development of a regional forest certification system in Africa. The regional forest certification system would be called the Pan African Forest Certification (PAFC), and logging companies operating in Gabon are very much supportive of such an initiative. A feasibility study for the establishment of such a system was conducted in 2002 (INDUFOR 2002) with the financial assistance of the French government. Although the ATO is very active in promoting the establishment of an operational PAFC (which has not yet occurred) it is not clear what the role of ATO within the PAFC would be. Would the role of ATO be limited to standard setting or would the organisation be more involved in the institutional framework of such a system? The PEFC may also establish cooperative links with the eventual PAFC, which would be designed following the PEFC's institutional design. It is possible that the PAFC could become operational during the coming five years, but the credibility of such a system would be low in European markets compared to the FSC. Nevertheless, if formal links are established between the PAFC and the PEFC, there will be a better acceptance of the PAFC at the international level.

Stakeholders also tend to favour phased approaches to forest certification, which consist of dividing full compliance with the standard into a series of phases, making it possible to focus on one or two tasks at a time, instead of trying to begin all the necessary activities at once.

Future Research

Future research that could improve the understanding of forest certification, its impacts and its potentials in Gabon and the Congo Basin can be identified as follows:

- *Forest policy approaches in Gabon and the Congo Basin.* Sustainable forest management and the success of forest certification depend to a great extent on forest policy approaches. Unfortunately there have not been important research efforts to improve the understanding of forest policy approaches in Gabon and the Congo Basin. What are the dynamics in decision-making concerning forest management? How is power over the management of forest resources balanced between the state, private profit-seeking enterprises, the local populations and the donor community?

- *Forest management certification and poverty reduction.* It is well accepted that one of the most important underlying causes of forest degradation in developing countries is poverty, which encourages forest management actors to adopt short-term forest management practices. Therefore, if forest certification is to achieve the goal of sustainable forest management in Central Africa, it should be capable of addressing the issue of poverty reduction. Are the existing approaches and standards of forest certification designed to contribute to poverty reduction? Or, is forest certification mostly oriented towards satisfying moral concerns of the consuming societies in Europe and North America?
- *Forest certification and state institutions.* During the first ten years of its implementation, forest certification systems have been based on non-state and market driven approaches; however, the success of the approaches has been very limited in Gabon and the Congo Basin. The improvements noted in forest management practices are to some extent related to government actions. Can new relationships be defined between forest certification and state policies? Are there ways to achieve synergies between forest certification and state actions?

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ACRONYMS

ATO	African Timber Organization
ITTO or OIBT	International Tropical Timber Organization
GDP	Gross Domestic Product
CFAD	<i>Concession Forestière sous Aménagement Durable</i>
PFA	<i>Permis Forestier Associé</i>
PGG	<i>Permis de Gré à Gré</i>
NTFP	Non Timber Forest Products
CFG	<i>Compagnie Forestière du Gabon</i>
CEB	<i>Compagnie Equatoriale du Bois</i>
SYNFOGA	<i>Syndicat des Forestiers Industriels du Gabon</i>
IFIA	Interafrican Forest Industries Association
GTZ	German Technical Cooperation
C&I	Criteria and Indicators
EU	European Union
NWG	National Working Group
PCI	Principles, Criteria and Indicators
FSC	Forest Stewardship Council
UNCED	United Nations Commission on Environment and Development
COMIFAC	<i>Conférence des Ministres en charge des Forêts de l'Afrique Centrale</i>
PEFC	Pan European Forest Certification
PAFC	Pan African Forest Certification
NGO	Non Government Organisation
FMU	Forest Management Unit
EIA	Environmental Impact Assessment

