



**COMMUNITY-BASED FOREST MANAGEMENT
IN THE DEMOCRATIC REPUBLIC OF CONGO:
A FAIRYTALE OR A VIABLE REDD STRATEGY?**

January 2010

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Community-based forest management in the Democratic Republic of Congo: a fairytale or a viable REDD strategy?¹

KEY MESSAGES

- Community-based forest management can be an effective tool for improving rural livelihoods and ensuring sustainable management of forest resources;
- A SWOT analysis of the Democratic Republic of Congo suggests that a community-based approach could be the most viable in helping the country to improve management of its forests and bring about economic development, given the governance challenges it faces;
- A community-based approach offers the most realistic and effective basis for the country's REDD strategy.

I. INTRODUCTION

In the context of international discussions on climate change, a profound debate has developed within the forest sector as to how rates of deforestation and forest degradation, significant sources of carbon emissions, can be curtailed. A range of proposals are being considered for an international mechanism that would facilitate developing countries to take action within this sector – a so-called “REDD” mechanism (Reduced Emissions from Deforestation and Degradation). Consequently, forest-rich countries around the world have begun to consider how they could participate in such a mechanism – thus, what kind of forest strategy would enable them to reduce their carbon emissions from this sector while also meeting their development goals.

This paper considers one possible strategy for the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) – a strategy based on community management of forests. Such a strategy would seem to be a fairytale to many. However, based on an analysis of the country's strengths and weaknesses, as well as the experiences of other countries, it is suggested that this may present the most viable option for the DRC. Before turning to the analysis, let us begin with the fairytale...

II. THE FAIRYTALE

The year is 2019, ten years since the world's governments met in Copenhagen to decide how to cut their greenhouse gas emissions and tackle climate change. At this meeting, support was given for the development of a REDD mechanism under which tropical forest countries could receive payments for reducing their greenhouse gas emissions from deforestation and degradation. In response to this, over the last decade the DRC has been implementing a strategy to ensure the conservation and sustainable use of its forests. This has resulted in some remarkable developments within the country. The rate of deforestation has been reduced; conflict over land and resources has declined; poverty in rural areas has dropped significantly; and income for the government from the forest sector has grown.

The strategy adopted by the country 10 years ago was a radical one at the time, the government deciding to formally delegate significant rights over the country's forests to communities. The decision to follow this route was based on the recognition that such an approach offered the most effective way to bring the country's forest sector under control given the challenges of weak governance and immense poverty that it faced at the time.

¹ This paper was prepared within the framework of Forests Monitor's project “Developing community forestry management as a contribution to poverty reduction in the Democratic Republic of Congo”. Please refer to the project website for further details: http://www.forestsmonitor.org/en/community_forestry_drc

HOW A COMMUNITY-BASED APPROACH WAS IMPLEMENTED

The Congolese government's strategy entailed ceding the control of large areas of the country's forests to its rural population through the allocation of "local community concessions". The formal recognition of their rights and responsibilities inspired communities to experiment with a variety of different approaches to forest management. Some have become engaged in harvesting timber, others in extraction of non-timber forest products, while in those parts of the country where there was significant forest degradation and deforestation, communities have established agro-forestry systems which now supply charcoal, timber and fruits to the growing local markets.

These various enterprises have helped to reinvigorate local economies while also improving forest management. The proliferation of small enterprises engaged in processing timber and other forest products has resulted in greater employment opportunities in rural areas – in harvesting, processing and marketing of products. In recent years, several communities have succeeded in obtaining certification for their products, helping them to access overseas markets and obtain higher prices. These initiatives have also resulted in increased revenues for the government from the collection of taxes on these enterprises. At the same time, forest management has been improved. Agroforestry systems have helped to reduce the pressure on forests in many areas. More fundamentally, with a greater sense of ownership over their resources, communities have been inspired to ensure that these are managed sustainably and to protect their resources. Furthermore, the delegation of responsibilities to communities for monitoring and controlling forest use has meant that they also have the tools to do so.

Some communities have decided to prioritise conservation rather than the extraction of resources. This approach has been facilitated by the establishment of a national system for payments for environmental services (PES). Under this scheme, established in order to encourage the maintenance of the country's biodiversity and ecosystems, communities can receive payments if they protect their forests. Some communities have also reached agreements with researchers interested in the country's biodiversity and in bio-prospecting,

while tourists have been visiting in increasing numbers bringing additional revenue. The establishment of these community conservation areas has meant that the country has more than achieved its target to protect 15% of its land area.

Communities have also been given a greater voice in the forest sector as a whole, with more say in the allocation of land and forests to other users and in their subsequent management. One way in which this has been achieved is through the implementation of participatory land-use planning. This process has resulted in the renegotiation of the extent and boundaries of a number of protected areas and concessions (for timber, mining and agroindustry) as well as greater recognition of the rights of local people to access and manage forest resources within these areas. Although the land-use planning was a long process it has paid off as it has resulted in a significant reduction in conflict between the various stakeholders and a decline in illegal activities such as timber extraction, mining and hunting.

Communities have also been given a more active role in monitoring the timber industry. They have been working in partnership with local authorities who were given responsibility for monitoring and enforcement under the country's decentralisation process. The transfer of these responsibilities to the local level has greatly improved the efficiency and effectiveness of this work. Artisanal logging has been largely brought under control and formalised, and the performance of industrial timber companies has also improved. This has resulted in both improved forest management and an increase in timber prices, and consequently, greater profits for the legal operators as well as increased revenues for the forest authorities. Furthermore, due to the improved security over resources people have been reinvesting their profits into forest management and local enterprises. Therefore, funds that were previously being channelled to fund conflict in some parts of the country are now helping to promote local development.

With improved livelihoods in rural areas, the flow of people migrating to the cities has slowed. Further, the improvements in governance have brought about greater stability and peace across the country.

And here the fairytale ends.

III. COULD THE FAIRYTALE BECOME REALITY?

Considering the current situation in the DRC, it would be easy to simply dismiss the above scenario as a fairytale. However, experiences from other parts of the world do suggest that it could be achieved. Furthermore, given the challenges faced by the country, such a community-centred approach could well prove the most effective way of achieving sustainable economic development and greater political stability. Let us consider the evidence for this.

EXPERIENCES FROM OTHER COUNTRIES

The experience of other countries with a community-centred approach to forest management has shown mixed results. This is in large part because success is highly dependent on the political and socio-economic conditions within which community forestry is implemented (Pokorny & Johnson, 2008; Schreckenber & Luttrell, 2009). Two conditions are of particular importance: genuine delegation of rights to communities and; sufficient support (both political and technical) being provided to the sector. Where these conditions have been in place there is evidence to suggest that a community-centred approach can be successful.

Let us begin by considering one of Congo's neighbours, **Tanzania**, where a policy of participatory forest management has been pursued for the last 15 years. Significant areas of forest have been ceded to local communities, with an estimated 3 million hectares under some form of decentralised management by 2006 (Lund & Treue, 2008). While the outcomes have been mixed across the country – perhaps inevitably given the radical change in approach that it represents – there are indications that it has brought about benefits both for communities and the government. Thus, livelihoods have been improved overall within participating villages, forest quality has also improved due to better management practices and greater control of forest use, and the forest authorities have seen a marked increase in

the revenues collected from the sector (Blomley et al., 2008; Lund, 2007; Lund & Treue, 2008).

Nepal is another country that has implemented participatory forest management. As in Congo, the vast majority of Nepal's population live in rural areas and are highly dependent on forest resources, and the country has also been subject to political unrest and conflict. Here nearly a quarter of the country's national forests have been handed over to the control of some 14,000 "Community Forest User Groups", representing 38% of the population. In contrast to those forests that have remained under government management, community forests have improved in condition becoming more densely forested. They have also increased opportunities for communities to earn cash incomes (Maharjan et al., 2009). These developments have been achieved in spite of political unrest and conflict – indeed, during periods of conflict, state presence was extremely limited in rural areas and community forest user groups were one of the only functioning governance institutions (Ostrom & Nagendra, 2006; Pokharel & Byrne, 2009).

One country that has undergone an even more dramatic shift towards community management is **Mexico**. This has been taking place since the 1970s and today the majority of the country's forests are under some type of community management – perhaps as much as 80% although statistics are uncertain. Analysis of the impact of community forests in this country has shown that they can prove effective both at increasing rural incomes and ensuring forest conservation. In particular, where there is local processing of forest products, community forests have generally had a positive impact on economic development. Further, in two regions of the country where community forests predominate, deforestation rates have been lower than the national average (Bray et al., 2005).

The evidence from these three countries that community-based management can be an effective tool for sustainable forest management is backed up by a recent global study of forest lands under different ownership regimes. Comparing 80 different forest areas from around the world, it was found that those areas under community ownership were

being managed more sustainably (with greater forest density and higher levels of carbon storage) compared to those under government control. Further, this study showed that the greater the degree of local autonomy of rule-making, the greater the likelihood of these forests being managed sustainably and also bringing positive livelihood benefits (Chhatre & Agrawal, 2009).

making, resource management, etc.) in many parts of the country.

IV. WHY SHOULD CONGO TAKE A COMMUNITY-CENTRED APPROACH?

These examples indicate that a community-centred approach can be a means to achieve sustainable development, bringing improved management of forest resources together with increased incomes for rural peoples. Further, they suggest that community management of forests should be an integral part of the DRC's REDD strategy, since its association with improved forest management means that it can be an effective tool for reducing carbon emissions from the forest sector.

However, as noted above, the success of such an approach depends on the political and socio-economic environment within which it is being implemented. This raises the question of whether such an approach would work within the DRC and if it is the most appropriate for the country. One way to address this question is by doing a SWOT analysis of the DRC.² Based on a review of the literature and Forests Monitor's expertise, a preliminary analysis was undertaken in relation to the objective of achieving sustainable management of the country's forests. This identified the following:

Strengths:

- immense and diverse forest resources;
- large population dependent on forests and their resources;
- diverse and active civil society;
- existence of traditional institutions (for decision

Weaknesses:

- poor governance record (including widespread corruption, lack of transparency and accountability; poor law enforcement);
- limited capacity within government (human, technical and financial);
- limited capacity within civil society and rural communities (with weak or dysfunctional institutions in many cases);
- political instability and conflict in parts of the country, including illegal forest exploitation by armed groups;
- incomplete legal framework, including a lack of clarity over land tenure;
- growing pressure on land, due to demand for concessions for mining, timber, agriculture and plantations.
- communication problems due to the size of the country and poor infrastructure;
- no banking facilities in rural areas and limited access to finance (e.g. microfinance);

Opportunities:

- size and diversity of the country means that there is room to explore different approaches;
- untapped potential of rural people and civil society;
- forest reform underway and a process for forest zoning in development;
- decentralisation process underway;
- opportunity to create new laws that are appropriate to current realities and future opportunities;
- potential availability of pre-REDD & REDD finance.

Threats:

- potential for elite capture (including by militia groups) of forest benefits because of weak governance and limited government control in parts of the country;
- lack of political strength within the forestry sector to win out over other interests (e.g. for mining or plantations);
- powers not truly delegated to the local level

² A SWOT analysis is a tool developed within the business world to make strategic planning decisions. It entails the identification of the Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities and Threats (hence the acronym, SWOT) of an institution in relation to a particular objective.

- undermining the decentralisation process and efforts to manage resources locally;
- unavailability of funding because of political instability and poor governance.

The challenge to be addressed in the DRC is how to ensure that the above opportunities are realised while minimising the threats. A community-based approach is one means by which this could be achieved, as the following section explains.

One of the key strengths of the DRC is that it has a large forest-dependent population with strong links to the forest and a large civil society sector. A strategy focused on rural peoples would provide a means to capitalise on these resources while at the same time overcoming the serious weakness of limited government capacity. In many parts of the country the government is all but absent, while traditional institutions continue to play an important role in decision-making about land and resource rights and in particular for conflict-resolution. Therefore, building on these existing structures and institutions would not only make the most of existing expertise and human resources, but it could also be an efficient and cost-effective way of filling the gap left by government. This has proven an effective strategy in other parts of the world and is particularly important in conflict situations where the government may be all but absent. In such situations local institutions tend to be more “robust”, as highlighted in the case of Nepal.

As noted above however, traditional institutions within many Congolese societies are weak, dysfunctional or inequitable and so should not automatically be adopted or subsumed into a national forest management system. Neither should they be ignored though, since they can provide a sound basis for establishing legitimate, effective management if sufficient support and capacity building is provided for their reform and development. This is where Congolese civil society could play an important role as there is an extensive network of organisations across the country, many of which are already active in this domain.

An additional “strength” of the DRC lies in its immense forest resources. This means that there is sufficient space for community forestry, with enough land available and also sufficient forest resources (at least in many parts of the country) for community forestry to be financially viable. Experiences in other countries show that forest enterprises are more likely to succeed and to bring significant benefits to communities where the forests are of good enough quality or of sufficient area to provide significant commercial resources. (Mahanty et al., 2009). However, this situation risks changing due to the growing pressure on land within the DRC for timber, mining, agriculture and biofuels.³

To overcome this threat participatory land-use planning needs to be implemented, and the current development of a forest-zoning process provides an opportunity to realise this. Such an approach will help to ensure that the country’s land is allocated in a fair and rational manner that will maximise the benefits for the DRC and its people. It will also provide a means to engage all stakeholders in decision-making, a crucial element in devising management strategies that are locally appropriate and broadly acceptable (Ostrom & Nagendra, 2006).

In parallel with this process, legislation needs to be clarified, particularly on land rights and community forestry. As noted above, the incomplete nature of the current legal framework presents an opportunity to create a legal framework that is appropriate to current realities and that will also allow the country to take full advantage of future opportunities.

One such opportunity is the potential availability of REDD finance if an international REDD mechanism is established. In fact, funds are already available – those aimed at enabling countries to become “ready for REDD”, such as the World Bank’s Forest Carbon Partnership Facility (FCPF) and Forest Investment Programme and the UN-REDD funds. These provide a significant opportunity for the DRC to implement some of the governance reforms that are required within the forest sector to improve its performance. Such reform will also be necessary if the DRC is to be able to benefit fully from

³ See for example a recent report that 10 million hectares of land have been allocated to South African farmers. Daily News, 21 Oct. 2009. Available at: <http://www.dailynews.co.za/index.php?fArticleId=5211627>. [Accessed 8 Jan. 2010]

the potential opportunity of future REDD funds. Improved law enforcement, reduced corruption and greater transparency and accountability will all be needed if it is to succeed in bringing about verifiable reductions in deforestation and degradation.

Even if these conditions are met, it should be highlighted that REDD is unlikely to result in a huge windfall of money for the DRC (or indeed other countries) at least in the short term. This is because such a mechanism will take several years to become established and it will also entail significant transaction costs (most notably for monitoring and verification). It is also likely to be performance-based and so funding will not be available upfront, or certainly not all of it. Therefore such funds will most likely only be able to make a relatively small contribution to the country's forest sector. This is not to undermine the importance of REDD funds as they could provide an important means of tipping the balance in favour of a more sustainable forest sector. However given this, it is important that the DRC takes a broad perspective in developing its REDD strategy. Thus, it needs a strategy that is not aimed simply at accessing REDD funds but one that is focused on the country's needs – of improved political stability, poverty reduction and sustainable economic development. A community-based strategy would also meet these criteria.

V. FINAL COMMENTS

Implementation of a community-centred strategy will require a restructuring of the forest sector within the DRC, including a reallocation of the benefits that it generates so that a far greater proportion of these reach the country's rural poor. This will mean that some stakeholders will lose out, notably, big business interests and some of the political elite and so there will be potentially difficult political decisions to be made.

Therefore if such an approach is to be achieved, vision and strong leadership within the government will be essential. Equally importantly, political weight will be required within the relevant parts of government. Within the forestry department those responsible for community forestry will need to have enough weight to be able to implement their policies so that sufficient space (both literally and politically) can be carved out for it. Further, those responsible for forests and for climate change will need to be able to have their voices heard alongside those ministries and departments responsible for other sectors, such as mining, finance and agriculture. There will also need to be excellent coordination between the various ministries so that a viable land-use strategy, with broad consensus, can be established.

In addition, there will need to be significant investment in community forestry as it will require new institutions and skills within the country. Therefore, financial support and training will need to be targeted at this sector and to be maintained for a number of years to ensure that community forestry is widely implemented and effective.

Ultimately, what is needed is for the government to have a clear vision of where it would like Congo to be in 10 or even 50 years from now so that a path can be mapped out towards this goal. This paper argues that the “fairytale” outlined above is a vision worthy of consideration and, with the appropriate leadership and support, can become a reality.

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