

Forest Certification in Gabon

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ABSTRACT

Located in the West Coast of the Central Africa sub-region, Gabon covers a total land area of 26.7million ha. The forest cover (dense forest) is estimated to be 20,677,000 ha representing 80.2% of the total land area. The biological diversity of Gabon's forests is exceptional. The economy of Gabon is dominated by the extraction and export of crude oil. The contribution of the timber industry to the Gross Domestic product of Gabon is estimated at 4%, however, the timber industry provides more employments than any other industry in the private sector of Gabon. All forests of Gabon are part of the national forest domain, and are an exclusive property of the state. Gabon produces about 4 millions cubic meters of industrial round logs annually, most of it is sold in international markets as round logs. The most important markets for Gabon's timber products are located in Asia followed by Europe. Forest certification and debates around it has been introduced in Gabon since 1996 through donor projects. Certified forests in Gabon cover about 1.5 millions ha managed by three companies. Certified forests in Gabon cover about 1.5 millions ha from three companies. All the three companies have certificates endorsed by the Keurhout system and there is no FSC certificate in Gabon. It is difficult to isolate the effects of forest certification from those of policy changes which have occurred in Gabon during the last ten years. However, the opinion is that beyond getting forest land certified, the whole debate around forest certification has impacted the forestry sector of Gabon positively in terms of benefit and power sharing among stakeholders, and ecological considerations of the forest ecosystems. Although the capability of forest certification alone to improve on forest management practices is still limited, An increasing number of organizations in Gabon consider forest certification as a potential tool to promote sustainable forest management in the country.

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I. INTRODUCTION

As forest certification in tropical countries relates (at least for now) to international timber trade, the logging industry of Gabon, which depends heavily on foreign markets of developed countries, has taken seriously the issue. Similarly, there are many other parties interested in the management of Gabon's forests including the government and civil society actors, who are involved in different aspects of forest certification. Gabon is the only country of the Congo Basin in which there are already certified forests. Although the certified forests represent a minority among timber harvesting concessions in Gabon currently, it is likely that more forest concessions managers will move towards certification during the next few years despite difficulties related to the choice between forest certification schemes.

Located in the West Coast of the Central Africa sub-region, Gabon covers a total land area of 26.7million ha. The forest cover (dense forest) is estimated to be 20,677,000 ha representing 80.2% of the total land area (*Mayaux et al. 1998*). The most important forest type is the natural tropical rainforest while forest plantations play an insignificant role. The biological diversity of Gabon's forests is considered exceptional. The total number of plants species is still unknown but estimations vary from 6000 to 10.000 (Lejoly, 1996). The diversity of animal species is equally important and according to Christy *et al.* (2003) the forests of Gabon host 30%, 35% and 11% of the world populations of gorillas, chimpanzees and elephants respectively.

The population of Gabon is about 1.2 millions inhabitants (Christy *et al.*, 2003) which gives an average population density of 4.6 inhabitants/km². The low population density added to the fact that most of the population of Gabon live in urban areas may contribute to the low pressure on forestlands from other land utilisation types such as agriculture. In fact annual deforestation in Gabon as estimated in FRA 2000 is about 10,000 ha per year which is very close to 0.0% (FAO, 2001).

The economy of Gabon is dominated by the extraction and export of crude oil, which contributes to the Gross Domestic Product (GDP) by more than 80%. The contribution of the timber industry to the GDP is estimated to be 4%. However, the timber industry provides more employments than any other industry in the private sector of Gabon as it employs about 28% of the total active population of the country (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 compared to other countries of the sub-region. The interest of Europeans colonizers on Gabon's timber dates from the late 1800's and has always been centred around one main species, Okoume (*Aucoumea klaineana*). Perhaps because of the small size of the domestic market, industrial logging in Gabon continues to be oriented towards international export markets and mainly Asian and European markets. The major logging companies that are operating in Gabon are part of multinationals holdings with foreign capital. Gabon exports industrial raw logs as well as processed timber products.

II. BACKGROUND FACTORS

Ownership and Tenure

From the forest law of 2001 (art. 13), all forests of Gabon are part of the national forest domain, and are an exclusive property of the state (Government of Gabon, 2001). 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 State include classified forests (i.e. protected areas, recreation forests, research forests, botanical and zoological gardens, state forest plantations) and registered timber production forests. The permanent forests are called so because, in the general land use planning approach of Gabon, these forested lands are committed to remain forests and cannot be converted to other land-use types such as agricultural farms, grazing lands etc. At the contrary, non permanent forests might be cleared and converted to other land use types if needed.

All forest exploitation is preconditioned by an authorisation from the forestry administration. However, for their subsistence, local communities enjoy customary usage rights over some forest products. Customary usage rights are set by State regulations after consultations with the local populations. Customary usage 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 ought to obtain permits from the forestry administration. There are three types of logging permits:

- The forest concession under sustainable management (CFAD¹) which can cover a surface area between 50,000 ha and 200,000ha. 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 permit (PFA²) 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 (PGG³) also granted only to Gabon National. It concerns cutting of less than 50 trees.

The CFAD and PFA are granted within the permanent forest estate (PFE) and should be managed in accordance with forest management plans developed by the concessionaire and approved by the forestry administration. On the other hand, the PGG are granted in the rural forest domain only. In addition to the forest management plans, enterprises which apply for logging rights in a CFAD should also develop an industrialisation plan, showing commitment to process timber locally.

¹ From Frenh « Concession Forestière sous aménagement Durable »

² Permis Forestier Associé

³ Permis de Gré à Gré

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 do 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 that in the process of designing a management plan, the concessionaire is required by some stakeholders to include measures for the protection of wildlife and NTFPs, then in that case, after the management 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 dollar) 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% of the value above. The value-based on the other hand, relate 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 Europeans and particularly French). About 50% of the opened areas are exploited by 13 enterprises while the five biggest logging enterprises manage about 30% of all the forest permits these are Rougier Ocean Gabon, Leroy Gabon, Compagnie Forestière du Gabon (CFG), Compagnie Equatoriale du Gabon (CEB) and Lutexfo/Soforga.

Two millions ha of forest concessions now have final decrees while the remaining are still under temporary agreements. Most of the forests currently under temporary agreement occur in zones that are mostly 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 which is topped at the regional level par 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 interest of the forest industry at the international

level⁴, thus it has been present in all discussions related to forest certification in Gabon and other African countries.

Markets

From the forest industry view point, the forest resource base of Gabon is subdivided in two zones officially called zone 1 and zone 2. Zone 1 covers five millions ha located along the coast in the west of the country. Because of easy access to the seaport of Libreville and Port-Gentil, forest exploitation started in this part of the country at the beginning of the 20th century, and took place only there until 1956. As a consequence, forests of this zone have been overexploited and it is estimated that secondary forest account for more than 95% of the resource found here. The road infrastructure is more developed than in the interior of the country. Zone 1 includes the provinces of Ogooué-Maritime, Estuaire, Moyen-Ogooué, and a small part of Ngounié.

In contrast zone 2 covers the remaining 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% of this production is still exported as raw round logs (Fomete, 2003). Logs 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 there is the "*Société Nationale des Bois du Gabon*" (SNBG), jointly owned by the State and private shareholders, which is responsible for commercialising, Gabon's timber products in international markets. The SNBG tries to regulate 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 towards European markets.

Timber product export plays a very important role in the logging industry of Gabon. 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 towards 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 millions cubic meters of raw round logs, with about 45% of this going to China (OIBT, 2002).

All certified products are currently oriented towards European markets. The demands for certified products come particularly from countries of northern Europe such as Germany, The Netherlands and Belgium. Markets in countries of southern Europe including France, Italy and

⁴ www.ifiasite.com

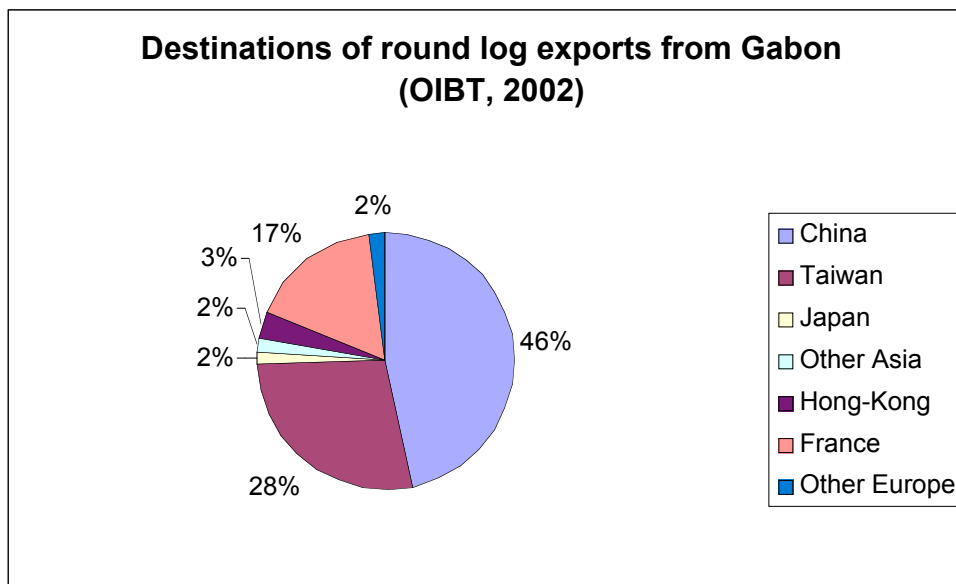
Portugal are less demanding on certified products. Asian markets, where the most important quantities of industrial round logs are sold do not seem to be interested in certified products⁵.

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 are located in Europe (veneer is also exported to Canada and plywood to the United States). In addition to the figures in table 1, Gabon also exports sawnwood, but in smaller quantities.

Table 1: Main destinations for timber product exports from Gabon

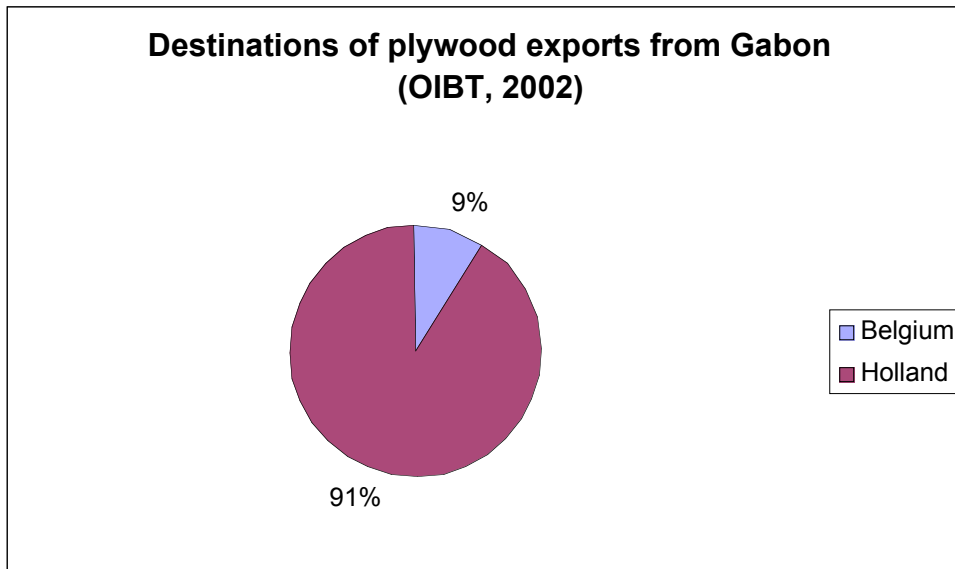
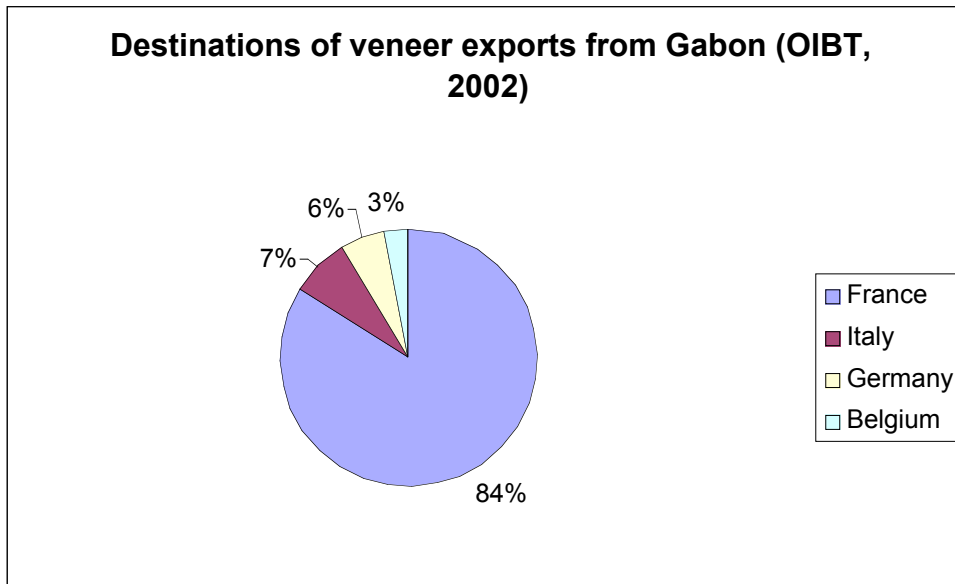
Round logs		Veneer		Plywood			
Asia		Europe		Europe (only)		Europe (only)	
Country	Volume (m ³)	Country	Volume (m ³)	Country	Volume (m ³)	Country	Volume (m ³)
China	1,124,660	France	415,225	France	31,985	Belgium	572
Taiwan	687,502	Portugal	114,400	Italy	2,809	Holland	5,600
Japan	40,582	Italy	44,197	Germany	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 (2002)⁶



⁵ Opinion expressed by the general Manager of Leroy Gabon.

⁶ The report cited indicate that there differences in figures related to the source of data. The figures included in this table are from importing countries sources.



Figures 1, 2 and 3. Export destinations.

Public policy approach

Traditionally, forest sector guiding decision 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 (i.e. the logging enterprises) may express their opinions on laws proposals before adoption. Some parties which are less informed (i.e. the local populations) have little say in the design of laws. An important influential party in the 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 levels regulations such as ministerial decisions have a lot less participative approach. Usually these are designed by the technocratic component of the Ministry and the Minister approves and signs the decision. There is no participation of external actors foreseen. However, in most cases the industry can lobby, while international stakeholders can also monitor the development of such regulations. But, the local populations and the industry workers are completely left out of the process. In some cases NGOs might be casually informed and might lobby but most of the time, local or national NGOs do not participate in the traditional decision making process of Gabon.

III. THE EMERGENCE OF FOREST CERTIFICATION

Initial Support

Sensitisation for forest certification in Gabon came from the international arena. However, stakeholders in the countries also joined the pace and the government as well as the forest industry and non government organisations (NGO) have been involved in different ways in the promotion of forest certification in Gabon.

It is obvious that logging enterprises that have progressed toward forest certification, received signal from international markets as the logging industry in Gabon depends heavily on these markets. Especially the logging enterprises that are approaching forest certification systems have a share of their markets located in Northern Europe including the Netherlands, Germany and the United Kingdom. These European countries are known to be amongst the most sensitive to environmental issues including demand of certified wood products. In recent years, France, which consumes the biggest part of timber products exported from Gabon to Europe, is also becoming more and more sensitive to the issue of forest certification.

One of the first important promotions of forest certification in Gabon came from a regional project implemented by **WWF Belgium** and financed by the **European Union (EU)**. The project started in 1996 and focussed on three African countries including Cameroon and Ghana in addition to Gabon. It was a one year project which aimed at promoting sustainable forest management through forest certification (Eba'a-Atyi and Simula, 2002). The objectives of the project were:

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

The WWF/EU project was later extended. One of the most important realisations of the WWF/EU project in Gabon was the setting of a national working group (NWG) on forest certification. The NWG consist 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 include a technical committee of five members well trained and much aware of issues related to forest certification. A great deal of

activities of the NWG have been oriented toward sensitisation about the facts of forest certification and consultation between stakeholders. For example, the NWG has organised seminars and workshops on four themes (Ondo, 2001, 2000):

- 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: what they are and what they are useful for.

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

The NWG is probably the most active organisation involved in awareness raising on forest certification in Gabon. It has been successful in positioning itself as one of the important actors, involved in discussions related to sustainable forest management in the country. However, it has faced problems related to budgetary limitations as an independent organisation. The activities carried out until now have been financed from outside either by the WWF/EU project or the German Technical Cooperation (GTZ). Another problem of the NWG is that its relationship with existing certification schemes is not clear to forest operators. The WWF/EU project introduced the concept of forest certification in Gabon using the FSC as the best illustrative case, in fact in 1996 the FSC was the most known forest certification system. This resulted in the perception from the forest industry and the administration that the NWG was an advocate of the FSC system. But the project did not encourage the NWG to seek endorsement by the FSC. As a consequence, the activities of the NWG were not leading to concrete actions to implement forest certification in Gabon.

The **International Tropical Timber Organisation (ITTO)** has also encouraged its member states (Gabon is one the ITTO's African members) to be opened to forest certification. In fact 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. Understandably then, ITTO has been keen to support forest certification since it started after the Rio Summit, as a means to promote the use of C&I as an approach to sustainable forest management.

Although ITTO is not directly involved in promoting a particular certification system, it has been organising a number of events at the international level that promotes forest certification. Gabon is one of the ITTO's African member states. ITTO's role in promoting forest certification in its member countries focuses on (Eba'a-Atyi and Simula, 2002):

- Providing support for capacity building to its producing member countries in forest certification;
- Monitor progress in the comparability and equivalence of forest certification systems and explore opportunities for promoting convergence in forest certification standards in member countries including regional initiatives;
- Facilitate discussions involving stakeholders and provide 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;

- Recognise the potential contribution of forest management and chain of custody certification to the control of illegal logging and illegal trade of tropical timber;
- Facilitate dialogue and cooperation between consuming and producing countries, and educate stakeholders and the general public about the principles and complexities of sustainable forest management and the certification of natural and planted forests;
- Promote enabling conditions for sustainable forest management and its certification in its member countries;
- Support research to examine the effectiveness and efficiency of alternative set of indicators for satisfying specific certification criteria and clarify the impact of certification on sustainable forest management;
- Keep its members informed on initiatives related to international frameworks for mutual recognition between certification systems; and
- Provide support to regional certification for a and related organizations in the tropical regions.

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

The **Keurhout Foundation** has also contribute to expansion of forest certification in Gabon. The Keurhout Foundation is specific for timber product exported to the Netherlands. It was developed based on an official act from the Government of The Netherlands which 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 are said to be derived on the ITTO's definition of sustainable forest management, the Forest Principles (UNCED) and the FSC principles.

At **the government** level there was also an expression of will to make progress on forest certification. The government's support to forest certification came from a sub-regional initiative in 1999 when the Heads of States of countries of central Africa (Cameroon, The republic of Congo, Gabon, Equatorial Guinea, Central African Republic, The democratic Republic of Congo and Chad) held a summit in Yaoundé (Cameroon) on the conservation and sustainable management of tropical forests (COMMIFAC, 2003). In their final declaration (now often referred to as the "Yaoundé Declaration"), the Heads of States committed their countries (amongst which Gabon) to adopt harmonised national forest policies and accelerate the implementation of forest management tools notably harmonised forest certifications systems, internationally recognized, approved by States of Central Africa and develop human resources for their implementation. Even though it was not clear whether this meant that a regional certification would be developed, the result of the declaration was that in countries such as Gabon, the forestry administration became positive about forest certification and some resources were committed to issues related to development of certification standard and capacity building. It is worth noting that the Yaoundé Summit was partly initiated by WWF, which on the other hand was one of the

biggest proponent of forest certification from the beginning. This may explain why forest certification was explicitly mentioned in the Yaoundé declaration.

Institutional Design

Forest certification programmes that have been presented to Gabon include the FSC and the Keurhout system, although the Pan European Forest Certification system (PEFC) was recently involved in the reflections to set a regional certification system in Africa (including Gabon). Currently, the PEFC is not active in Gabon, and there is no ongoing process for the PEFC to include or set a forest auditing system in Gabon.

The two programmes (FSC and Keurhout) have their settings and procedures established at the international level outside Gabon. Therefore there are little specificities to Gabon in the institutional approaches used by these programmes. However, in comparison with the traditional approach used in Gabon, the forest certification approaches appear innovative.

In general with forest certification, there is usually a will to inform and involve all stakeholder groups in the decision making process, be it during the standard development process or during the evaluation of forestry operations which results in granting a certificate. The FSC standard development process is a typical illustration of the difference between government led decision making in standard setting and decision making by a certification system. The FSC requires that social, economic and environmental actors be involved equally in development of national standards. The balance of votes is 33% for each of the three sectors, so none of the sector can dominate the process (FERN, 2001).

Similarly, during the certification process, there are provisions for transparency vis-à-vis the general public. Reports of the assessment and monitoring missions are made available to the general public and interested parties can react. For example, the Keurhout Foundation has an appeal panel which receives and examines all claims of those who intend to oppose the granting of the label. An illustration of the consequences of transparency in the certification process was given in Gabon in 1996 after an FSC certificate was delivered to Leroy Gabon (see box 1). Some organisations opposed the certificate and after a second assessment, the certificate was withdrawn (the same thing happened with a Keurhout certificate in the Republic of Congo).

In addition the expert contribution is broader in the case of certification because experts are invited from organisations outside the concerned certification system whereas in the case of the government only government technicians and expert are usually called on. In the case of the development of standards for sustainable forest management by ATO (these standards can be used for forest certification), experts came not only from local governments but also from international NGO, Universities, Research Institutes and consultancies.

It is quite obvious from these developments above that; the institutional settings of certification systems are favourable to broader participation of stakeholders and more transparent than the traditional government-led decision making processes that prevails in Gabon. However, in the case of the FSC and Keurhout it might be argued that participation is limited because the

general frameworks are designed out of the country (even out of the African region) and stakeholders in Gabon have little possibilities to modify these.

Taking the example of the FSC system, Principles and Criteria were developed at the international level with equal participation of the three chambers (social, economic and environmental), but the corresponding field indicators and verifiers should be completed at the national level by an FSC national working group. Indicators and verifiers are very important because they take into account the specific forest management environment of the country. An FSC national working group should consist of at least 50% FSC members, but currently there is only one or two FSC members in Gabon, therefore there is no recognized FSC working group in Gabon and no national standard endorsed by FSC.

Consequently, if an enterprise operating in Gabon is interested in the FSC certification at this moment, the indicators for the assessment of forest management might be developed solely by the certifier with a very limited local participation. In fact, concerning the forest of Leroy-Gabon for which a FSC certificate was issued and later withdrawn, the national and local actors did not contribute to the development of the standards used. Similarly stakeholders in Gabon other than the logging enterprises have had a very limited participation during the process that resulted in the issuing of currently valid Keurhout certificates.

Standards

One of the arguments for the promotion of forest certification in Gabon was that traditional legal approaches to the control of forest exploitation are not enough to ensure sustainable management of forest resources as it does not sufficiently include ecological and social aspects. In addition, even forest law enforcement is weak because of lack of means by the forestry administration. Therefore, all standards developed try to include technical, social and ecological aspects. In Gabon, discussions on certification standards concentrate mainly on three sets: the Keurhout Foundation, the Forest Stewardship Council (FSC) and the harmonised ATO/ITTO set.

In fact, all the certified forests currently found in Gabon are under the **Keurhout system**. Keurhout uses four general minimum requirements which are:

1. 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.
2. The forest managing enterprises should have an appropriate management system.
3. The certification body is independent and meets international guidelines related to organisation and monitoring procedures, and professional competence in forest management.
4. 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 criteria for each principle) and indicators that are not numbered.

A more detailed standard is provided by the harmonised ATO/ITTO PCI set. ATO is a regional organisation constituted by 15 member countries from tropical Africa, one of which is Gabon. Based in Libreville⁷, the main objective of ATO is to harmonise forest policies within its members countries and to promote the development of its standards through a series of field tests conducted in a number of its member countries including Côte d'Ivoire (1995), Cameroon (1996), Gabon (1998), the Central African Republic (1998) and Ghana (1999-2000). ATO was supported financially by the EU and technically by the Center for International Forestry research (CIFOR) and used its methodology in standard setting (Prabhu *et al.* 1998). The approach consisted in using existing or suggested standards by other organisations, and then select and reformulate these based on the results of tests. The test consists in field assessment and auditing on selected forest sites under exploitation by logging companies in ATO member countries. The tests were conducted by a panel of international, regional and national experts and the results discussed during workshops with a broad participation of representatives of forest management stakeholders (ATO, 1999).

ITTO in the other hand published its first set of Criteria and Indicators (C&I) for sustainable forest management in 1992, based on experiences acquired in the implementation of the sustainable forest management in tropical countries and research advances in the field. This was further revised and a new set published in 1998.

Recognizing that both ITTO and ATO have adopted similar strategies in promoting sustainable forest management through 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 then 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 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 the 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 used for forest certification in the field.

Then at the FMU level, it comprises of “principles, 15 criteria, 57 indicators and 140 sub-indicators. The three principles of the FMU level include aspects related to:

- I. Sustainable supply of forest goods and services
- II. The maintaining of ecological functions
- III. The contribution of the forest to the improvement of the economic and social well-being of workers in the FMU and of local populations.

⁷ The capital city of Gabon

Forestry Problems

The problems relating to interest in forest certification in Gabon are not very specific to the country, but are linked with forestry problems of the whole tropical Africa region. The most important trends that forest certification tries to reverse in tropical Africa are the progressive reduction of forestland areas (deforestation) and the degradation of existing forests characterised by the loss of biological diversity. This problems are of special important in Gabon which is part of the Congo Basin, the second largest block of tropical forest in the World.

Deforestation and forest degradation are closely associated with population pressure and poverty (ITTO, 2003), which are the underlying causes of the current situation. The more direct causes 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
- 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 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 entirely used in forest management.

All these problems have given way the unsustainable forest management practices that favours short term tangible benefits and give a lower value to longer term solutions. Forest certification may be seen as a complementary tool, which if added to the efforts of the forestry administration, can encourage better forest management practices. For example all the existing and proposed certification standards make provision for the strict respect of all legal provisions set by the State concerning forest management. Therefore forest certification has the potential to contribute to law enforcement desired by government institutions.

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 to raise awareness about forest certification amongst all stakeholders. These challenges are confronted by efforts at sensitisation made through NGOs, training programs designed for different stakeholders and particularly oriented towards forest administrations officers. However, the most important strategy for the promotion of forest certification is certainly the development of environmental 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 market.

Another important challenge which is yet to be met is to dissociate forest certification with 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 of tropical timber products from Africa in International markets.

IV. 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 about 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 of 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 government institutions could not be part of the FSC process also favoured animosity against forest certification as a whole from state officials. However, it should also be recalled that, it is during that same period that Gabon started to experience changes in the political system, moving from a one-party monolithic system to multi-party system with sometimes violent episodes. There was a general fear from state officers to loose power on national resources.

For the last five years, the opinions of government decision makers about forest certification has acknowledge a great deal of improvement as more officers have acquired a better understanding of the objectives and procedures of forest certification. Some even note the positive effects that certification can have on the implementation of national laws. Nevertheless, there still is the perception that, as done currently, forest certification does not take into consideration the specifics of the economic, political, ecological and social environment of Gabon.

Domestic NGOs had also been very enthusiastic about forest certification at the beginning⁸, as they perceived forest certification as means that would allow them to monitor logging activities. The process of forest certification in most cases requires a great deal of transparency from the logging enterprise, therefore local NGOs can use the opportunity to have a say on Gabon's logging activities. Unfortunately, the enthusiasm of national NGOs has decreased

⁸ Personnal discussions with Constant Alogo and Omer Ntougou, two domestic NGOs Direstors.

over time, possibly because there have not been many enterprises committed to forest certification within the FSC system (see also box 1).

The reaction from the local communities has been about inexistent possibly because of a very low level of information about forest certification and related procedures.

Forest Owners

As indicated in section II, forests assigned for sustainable timber production in Gabon are owned by the State. However they are managed by private individuals or companies. In addition most of the timber production forests are managed by multinational companies with European capital. Therefore, apart from the reaction of the State (forestry administration), which has been discussed above, there is also the reaction of these managing companies which, deserves to be mentioned.

The forest managing companies or logging companies reacted in two different ways at the beginning (during the 1990s). A few companies immediately were directly open to embrace forest certification, other 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 box1). 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). Then, they had an audit conducted by SGS QUALIFOR UK, and a FSC certificate was granted to Leroy Gabon in 1996. Unfortunately, the certificate was later withdrawn due to action by some national and international NGOs that complained about the validity of the certificate. The opposition of the NGOs was based on three points: 1) Poor stakeholder consultation, 2) Lack of forest management plan, and 3) The presence of a protected area aside 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. Unfortunately the withdrawal of the FSC certificate earlier granted to Leroy Gabon contributed to the negative opinion that some actors of the forest industry have on forest certification, as a potential way to ban timber products from Gabon from international markets.

Other companies such as Thanry Gabon also started adapting its management structure to meet the requirements of forest certification. The few companies, which began leaning towards forest certification right from the beginning, saw it as a strategy to have a better competitive edge and position on some markets, as most of their businesses and these were oriented towards international markets in general and particularly European markets that were the most important. However, the fact that the FSC certificate issued for Leroy Gabon was withdrawn decreased their enthusiasm about forest certification. Nevertheless, they made significant changes in heir management structures to meet 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.

The biggest numbers of companies were lukewarm and sceptical about forest certification. Many insisted on the costs of forest certification which was to be supported without guarantees that certified products would be sold at higher prices. 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 the tropical forests. There were also the developing Asian markets as 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. However, even these companies were waiting for a stronger signal from the market to move towards forest certification.

Another reaction came from the Union of Logging companies (IFIA). To address the worries of some of its members that saw forest certification resulting in a ban of timber product from Gabon internationally, IFIA proposed a code of conduct that would engage its member companies to making progress towards forest certification. IFIA's code of conduct includes four chapters:

1. Forest management,
2. Rational valorisation of forests,
3. Local processing of timber, and
4. Cooperation with all actors, and improvement of the living conditions of local people.

Each of the four chapter is further subdivided in articles. For example, the chapter on forest management is subdivided in 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 his logging business in Gabon for it has drawn a forest management to cover its activities for the next 30 years. The forest management plan of the Leroy's concession has been 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-resources 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 the sustainable management of its forest concessions and to the comply with FSC principles and criteria. The charter At that time, the Government of Gabon has just started reflecting on the revision of its forest legislation which will later be finalised in 2002. The elaboration of forest management plans was not yet mandatory for forest concessions managers as is the case now.

In 1996, Leroy had not yet develop a single 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 single management, there were a number of documents available which, all together were equivalent to a management plan. As pointed output 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 were threefold:

1. To 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,
2. The Lack of 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 adopted guidelines for drawing forest management

plans. Such guidelines would be used to assess the quality of forest management plan elaborated by private companies.

3. Lot 32 of the concession of Leroy was partly overlapping with the Lopé Reserve, a protected area for fauna.

Still according to leaders of the national NGOs, QUALIFOR suggested to put the certificate on hold until the issues raised could be resolved, but some NGO did not accept such a proposal. However, one of the NGO (*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 became transparent towards the 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 have on the FSC certification system is partly due to the case of Leroy. The industry (not only Leroy, but their union and IFIA) got the opinion that the NGOs are more powerful than other stakeholders within the FSC system. The failure of Leroy has incited the private companies interested to forest certification to turn to other certification schemes (especially Kerhout) or to support efforts to established a regional forest certification scheme. Another consequence of 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 Director⁹ 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 qualified 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.

The problem faced by IFIA through its code of conduct was that, it had no strategy of communicating the results of compliance with the world outside the logging industry. Furthermore, compliance with the code of conduct was hard to be seen 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 with 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 will be published periodically over the internet after an independent third party verification component will have verified accuracy of data received from the private sector.

⁹ Omer Ntougou

Current Status of Forestland Certification

Certified forests in Gabon cover about 1.5 millions ha from three companies: Thanry Gabon (CEB with 580,490 ha), Rougier (CFG with 287,951 ha) and Leroy¹⁰ (578,910 ha). All the three companies have certificates endorsed by the Keurhout system and issued by “Form Ecology”, a certification consultancy firm based in the Netherlands which conducted the audits in the field. All the three companies are considered be large scale operations. Smaller companies managing PFAs and CGGs find it difficult not only the go to forest certification, but 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 partnership with bigger multinational companies, and this may give and opportunity to progress towards sustainability.

The companies choose Keurhout because it appears to have a progressive system and a flexible approach which, to their opinion takes into account the environment in which forests are managed in Gabon (INDUFOR and FRM, 2003). In general, the 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 timbers in the European market. This opinion results from the action of from 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. This is because such definitions and information seem to be 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, Greenpeace¹¹ 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 ban in areas such as the Congo Basin.

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% of the total round log production of the country) . Part of this is processed in country and the other part is exported as industrial round log. All the certified timber products are now sold, easily in Europe. Although the prices are not affected, it is believed that the demand of certified products is currently higher than the supply in European markets (Packer, 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 be less incited to move faster toward forest certification.

¹⁰ After the withdrawal of the FSC certificate, Leroy Gabon was a few years later audited within the Keurout system and obtained a Keurhout certificate which is still valid

¹¹ www.greenpeace.org (2002)

V. EFFECTS OF CERTIFICATION

Because there is only one forest certification system implemented in Gabon, and the system uses a minimum requirement approach, forest certification seem 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 which have occurred in Gabon during the last ten years. However, the opinion in this paper is that beyond getting forest land certified, the whole debate around forest certification has impacted the forestry sector of Gabon positively in recent years.

Power

Among the stakeholders of 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 a very little say in forest certification in the case of Gabon. This may be inherent in the implementation of the certification system, which basically does not require much commitment in some aspects than what the government requires through its legislation.

In Gabon, the power structure continues to be influenced firstly 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, 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 opened to showing their legal records to the outside parties such as NGOs and are keen to cooperate with national and international organisation interested in promoting sustainable forest management. This for example the case of 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 engendered a similar attitude from the forestry administration, which have become more ready to discuss forest law enforcement with external actors. However, it should be emphasised that forest certification started in Gabon, when a more comprehensive effort was made in the direction of improving governance by the national government with the support of international organisations and donor countries. For example 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 because during the 1990's when certification was introduced. Many other initiatives were being taken at the international level to help improving forest management practices in Gabon at the same time. For example, the ITTO within its objective 2000 supported the efforts of Gabon, by financing pilot projects designed to improved 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 which 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 factor which have pushed forest policy decision makers to defines 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 the local development. In the past, logging companies contributed to the construction and the maintenance of the road infrastructure which was use both to transport harvested timber products and for local development. Each logging company depending on its location build a school for the employees children and had a health centre. This continues to be done but, nowadays; logging companies contribute also to the local development through direct financial resources put at disposal of local communities who are require to set local development committees for the management of such funds. The local committees determine development priorities and design small projects to be financed by such annual contributions received from logging companies. The amounts of these financial contributions are determined as part of the contract agreed on during the development of the forest management plan. This new approach stems from the forestry laws adopted in 2002 (art. 251). However, forest certification has made the process more transparent and companies that have certificates are more opened to show 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 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, 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 less conflicts with traditional authorities.

Economic

The most important beneficiaries of forest certification in economic terms have been the national government and the local communities. The national government have acknowledged an improvement of its taxation revenues from the certified companies, which not only pay the expected taxes but take initiative to settle their tax bill on time¹². Logging companies involved in forest certification are often ready to show 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 shows the case of CEB (box 2). The weak impacts of the revenues provided by the logging companies for local development relates more to the lack of capacity of community representative 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 they have not received sufficient benefits to meet the costs endure. Even access to new markets has not been experience. Probably, this relate to the fact that the only system adopted by companies operating in Gabon is restricted in terms of recognition, which is only in the Netherlands. In fact these Keurhout certified companies adopted the system to maintain their market in the Netherlands. In fact, 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.

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 holding: 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 Kerhout system. In prevision of the forest certification process, CEB started to experiment a new approach of 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 \$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 experience 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 member shared the money among themselves, and the money was used in a rather

¹² Opinion expressed by the Director of the Forestry Department within the Ministry of Forest Economy, Water, Fisheries in Charge of Environment and Nature Protection.

consumptive way by each person or family. Then after consultations with the local populations, it was decided that CEB opens a bank account where the revenues allocated to local development will be deposited. The community members will first identify ideas of microprojects that would improve the living conditions of the whole communities. Once a project is agreed, 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 infrastructures such as primary schools, infirmaries, installations for the supply of clean water, churches but also transport buses and the building of bars and the installation of television antennas. Some project ideas were rejected for being too costly or qualified as non viable to the opinion of the advisers from WWF and CEB. It became necessary for each of the communities to set 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 communities' members to facilitate the participation of the whole community in the implementation of the project and the internalization. On its side, CEB came to hire a specialist to deal with local communities.

According to the consultant¹³ contracted by CEB to help design its social policy, until now micro-projects have been successful in only 6 villages. In the other villages failures have come from disputes among villagers about 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 which have been encountered are part of the learning process. CEB started its policy only in 2000 and it would take more years for the local community to improve their capacity and skills for small-scale projects 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 the companies which have entered the certification process have changed their forest management practices. One of the most important aspect 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 measure for nature conservation and the protection of the environment. The practice is to set aside some nature or biodiversity conservation areas within the forest concession. Regulations to fight

¹³ Mrs Rose Ondo a Social Scientist from the Omar Bongo University

poaching within the concession have been introduced and workers face sanctions when found to be hunting for bushmeat.

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

VI. CONCLUSION

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 as the Forest Legislation Enforcement and Governance (FLEG) which is 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 gone towards Keurhout, which has limited options because it is specific to the Netherlands. Many actors of 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 fact that the FSC has now established a regional office in the neighbouring Cameroon may bring changes during the coming years. 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.

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 aid. Although the ATO is very active in promoting the establishment of an operational PAFC (which is not the case now) it is not clear what would be the role of ATO within PAFC if established. 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 cooperation links with the eventual PAFC which would be designed following its institutional design.

Stakeholders also tend to favour phased approaches to forest certification which consists 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.

Finally, the capability of forest certification alone to improve on forest management practices is still limited, as there are many other factors that encourage unsustainable uses of forest resources (flora and fauna) and 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 are which are found in the natural forests (Wunder, 2003) such as timber and bushmeat.

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