



**pour un
monde
meilleur**

**CEPECO ONGD / Asbl
Centre pour la Promotion
et l'Education des
Communautés de base**



EXECUTIVE NOTE

FIRST LOCAL FORUM, TSHELA, BAS CONGO

DATE : 8 – 9 SEPTEMBER 2009

The first local forum of the project “Community forest management as a contribution to poverty alleviation in DRC” held its first local forum on 8th - 9th September 2009, in the premises of the *Société des Cultures Agricoles et Industrielles du Mayombe* (SCAM) à Tshela. This local forum was organised by Forests Monitor and the NGO CEPECO,¹ which is responsible for the coordination of project activities in the Bas Congo site.

Objective of the forum

The objective of the forum was to present a summary of the community dialogues that have been held to date, and for other actors in the environmental sector to contribute to and validate their findings. The community dialogues have focused on five themes, these held over two weeks in villages in four “secteurs” of the territory of Tshela. The local forum also made recommendations to decision makers, so that the rights and concerns of local populations will be taken into account when designing or implementing policies on the management of forest resources by local communities.

Participants

Around 50 people from various institutions attended the local forum. They represented local public administrations (local police superintendent, territory administrator, leaders of all “secteurs”, representative of ANR², environmental supervisor, representative of the district and provincial environment coordination), the private sector (SCAM and artisanal loggers), civil society (CEPECO, AMAR, ADEV, ITENAC, CPPR, Catholic and Protestant churches) and local communities (customary leaders and village chiefs). The forum moderator was the coordinator of the FORCOM/FAO project operational unit in LUKI, who is also the focal point on community forests for MECNT.

The local forum

The local forum was structured around two main elements:

1. validation of results from community dialogues;
2. discussions around the 5 themes of these dialogues.

¹ CEPECO - *Centre pour la Promotion et l'Education des Communautés de base* – Centre for the promotion and education of local communities.

² ARN = *Agence Nationale de Renseignement* (National Intelligence Agency)

A report was presented on the running of community dialogues in four villages of the Mbanga, Lubuzi, Lobolo and Nganda Tsundi “secteurs”. These community dialogues covered the following themes: the status of forests, customary land rights, artisanal forest exploitation, the decision making process at community level, and synergies between protected areas and community forests. The results of the community dialogues were subsequently validated in the administrative centre of each of the four “secteurs” concerned.

It is important to note the enthusiasm and active participation of communities and local authorities during the dialogues as well as during the validation process. For example, 78 people attended the discussions on the decision making process in the village of Kayala and more than 124 people (out of 100 invitations) participated in the dialogues in the Lubolo “secteurs”.

On each occasion, local communities freely expressed their views on traditional mechanisms of forest resource management, which should be taken into account in the legislation on community forests in DRC.

Validated results from local and community dialogues

1. **Forest status and customary land rights:** Local communities reaffirmed that traditional land rights are assigned to families/lineages and clans, who have customary ownership of the land and its resources. They thus have the right to manage, administer and even to sell land. However, access to land and other resources is free for other community members.
2. **Artisanal logging:** Communities have indicated that this activity is one of the main factors of forest degradation and deforestation in the Mayombe region and that, apart from small individual benefits, artisanal forest exploitation does not bring real advantages to local communities. They expressed the wish to see artisanal logging banned in the whole of the Bas Fleuve district.
3. **Decisions concerning community life and resource management** fall under the responsibility of the village chief who acts in consultation with his “notables”, who also represent beneficiaries of land rights. The village council is thus responsible for the smooth running of community affairs.
4. **Natural resource conservation** is part of the traditions and customs of Bayombe communities. In spite of the intense exploitation and destruction to which the forest has been subjected since the 1920s, customary practices have ensured that some forests remain in this region. Local communities wish to take a more active part in national efforts towards the conservation of biodiversity and do not want to be simply subjected to them.

Themes discussed in detail

During the local forum in Tshela, the above results were validated and discussed in detail in small workshop groups organised around the following themes:

1. **Definition of a community:** Participants in the local forum identified five main criteria characterising local communities:
 - the link to a common maternal ancestor;
 - continuous residence in the same village;
 - being married to a member of this family;
 - the village name having been given according to the name of the common ancestor or village remains (*Bikhandanda*);

- the possession of forests.

These criteria perfectly corroborate the definition of the local community given in Article 1, point 17 of the Forest Code. Participants went further to highlight that the village or even the “village grouping” (*groupement*) is the foundation of the local community in the Bas Fleuve district. The local community is managed by well defined traditional institutions such as the family council (made up of the village chief and his notables, who represent the lineages) or the “village grouping” council (made up of the “village grouping” chief, his notables and the chiefs of the villages forming the “village grouping”). It is also envisaged that the “secteur” council, which will be established as part of the decentralisation process, may play an important role in administering local communities.

Participants in the local forum also noted that the boundaries of customary forests are defined through names given to areas by ancestors and that these are also known to neighbouring communities. However, participants emphasised that many communities in the district experience strong land pressure due to the fact that two thirds of their land is used by agro-industrial groups, for example SCAM. The need to rapidly find a solution to this problem was highlighted, as it generates much frustration within communities who are deprived of their land.

2. **Community conservation:** The local forum noted that the forest in the Bas Fleuve district is the source of human and animal life (for example, providing food and building materials). It guarantees the natural balance of rivers and the climate, it provides a base for many economic activities (agriculture, animal husbandry, industry, tourism, mines, medicinal plants, tourism, etc.) and has made the Bas-Fleuve district the breadbasket of Bas-Congo. However, many threats put its existence in danger, in particular, the high demographic pressure, anarchic exploitation of forests (encouraged by corruption and misappropriation of public funds, as well as the development of agro-industries. According to participants, the survival of the forest depends on giving local communities greater responsibility for conservation efforts.
3. **Artisanal logging:** Participants in the local forum deplore the negative effects of this activity, which they believe is one of the main causes of forest destruction in the Bas-Fleuve district. They have thus made the following recommendations:
 - The government should ban artisanal sawing with chain saws;
 - Important material support should be allocated to the local administration in charge of environmental issues in order to enable effective support to local communities;
 - Development NGOs should supervise the activities of wood sawyers to help them convert to different income generating activities;
 - The suspension of artisanal logging should be strictly enforced. Participants in the forum were surprised to learn that a measure exists to suspend forest exploitation in the whole of Bas Congo as forest exploitation continues openly and publicly. They thus reiterated their request for this measure to be enforced.
4. **The role and place of women in community forest management:** It was noted that it is the women who are the holders of power, which they can pass on to men. In some cases, women have the responsibilities of a village chief or a “village grouping” chief. The forum noted that it was important to maintain these established customs and to prevent the marginalisation of women in decision-making processes related to land and forest resources. Thus, measures must be taken to ensure the representation of women within all authorities with responsibility for the administration of the community and specifically on issues related to forest resource management.

The next local forum will take place in December in Tshela.

Boma
26/09/2009

On behalf of CEPECO

Pasteur Jacques BAKULU
Site Coordinator and focal point RRN/Bas Congo
B.P. 247, Boma I, Bas Congo, RDC
Tel: 00243 (0) 9 98 32 20 67
E-mail: cepecordc@yahoo.fr

Forests Monitor RDC, 12ème Etage, Immeuble BCDC,
Boulevard du 30 Juin, Gombe-Kinshasa, RDC
Tel: +243 (0) 8117 08 616 ; Fax: +44 (0) 1223 359 048

Forests Monitor UK, 69a Lensfield Road, Cambridge, CB2 1EN, UK
Tel: +44 (0) 1223 360975; Fax: +44 (0) 1223 359048

Web: www.forestsmonitor.org; Email: mail@forestsmonitor.org