

SUMMARY REPORT

FIRST PROVINCIAL FORUM IN MBANDAKA, EQUATEUR

DATE: 21 - 22 JANUARY 2010

Objectives of the Provincial Forums

The Provincial Forums¹ represent one of four levels of national dialogue on community forests, the others being national forums in Kinshasa, local forums in the territories and community dialogues at the village level. They are targeted at provincial-level actors, in particular the provincial parliaments and governments, judicial bodies, the private sector, the Church and local associations.

Place and participants

The first Provincial Forum for Equateur Province took place within the context of the FORCOL-MG/Forests Monitor project and was organised by the site coordination team of the Diocesan Commission for Natural Resources (CDRN) of the Diocese of Basankusu.

Forty-two people participated in the forum, representing different stakeholders involved in community forestry in the DRC, namely: the provincial parliament and government; the provincial administrative departments (Ministry of the Environment, Nature Conservation and Tourism (MECNT); Agriculture; Rural Development; Higher Education); civil society; the private sector; local NGOs; the project coordination team for Equateur; Forests Monitor national team; and the local media (Radio Lisanga, Okapi, Mambenga).

Summary of the Provincial Forum

The Mbandaka Provincial Forum was officially opened and closed by a representative of the Provincial Minister for the Environment, Nature Conservation and Tourism, together with an advisor from the Governorate.

Executive summary of the discussions

1. Presentation/feedback on the content of the Basankusu local forums

The first day of the Forum's work began with a consideration of the following four documents:

1. "Report on the process of implementing community forestry in the DRC", by Frédéric Djengo Bosulu, Director of the Forestry Department within MECNT;
2. "Presentation of the FORCOL-MG/Forests Monitor Project", by Théophile Gata, Forests Monitor;
3. "Summary of the community dialogues and local forums at Basankusu and Befale", by Abbé Dieudonné Eluo, CDRN;
4. "A summary of the national forums", by Prosper Situasendua, MECNT.

¹ The Provincial Forums consist of provincial-level meetings aimed at amending or enriching the results of discussions on community forestry which have taken place in both National Forums and Community Dialogues.

During the ensuing discussions, the participants raised questions aimed at understanding the slow and detrimental implementation (for local communities and indigenous peoples) of the Forest Code. They expressed their concern at the limited number of FORCOL-MG project sites in comparison with the future development of community forestry in the DRC. They also emphasised that indigenous peoples should be involved and the distinctive features of their culture and society taken into consideration when defining local community forests, above all when deciding on its area.

Questions were also asked with regard to the mechanisms to be put in place for the establishment and running of the institutions that will represent local communities for community forest management.

2. Contributions of the Mbandaka Provincial Forum participants

The Forum participants broke up into two working groups to discuss the themes of the Basankusu and Befale community dialogues and local forums, as presented by the Basankusu site coordinator, Abbé Dieudonné Eluo. After validating the results, further issues to be taken into account when producing the legal and institutional framework for community forests were noted, as follows:

- The participants listed the following criteria for community identification:
 - A community may include one or more clans with families who own forest,
 - A community's members are:
 - the descendants of a common ancestor,
 - have the same territory,
 - observe the same habits and customs,
 - speak the same dialect,
 - have one or more ancestral cemeteries, and
 - have perfect family cohesion, with the ability to inter-marry or not.
- The area of a community forest should be proportional to the size and future needs of each community;
- The factors to be taken into account in the delimitation of a community forest are: community history, geographical sites (streams, forest...), available natural and human resources, the systems of forest management and local way of life (habits and customs). This delimitation should be done by participatory mapping based on land rights and resource use;
- The role of the administration should be to raise awareness among communities with regard to the legal and regulatory texts on community forestry, to support communities in the management of their forests and to arbitrate in case of conflicts;
- Neighbouring communities will need to cooperate in the delimitation of a community forest in order to help ensure that boundaries will be respected;
- According to participants, artisanal logging should be allowed in the Province provided it is in compliance with the provisions of Article 112 of the Forest Code, and that it is accompanied by prior capacity-building of the local forestry administration and dissemination of the current laws among the local communities so that illegal practices can be overcome. Artisanal logging is important as a source of provincial taxes, job creation and traditional crafts (for example, the production of dugouts, and planks...). However, its disadvantages are (1) a failure to respect current forestry regulations; (2) the lack of social activities being undertaken by artisanal loggers that are of benefit to the communities and (3) the priority given to private interests over and above community interests. Hence the urgent need for training and rigorous monitoring and control;
- The main players involved in this activity in Equateur Province are: the communities, traders (not local), politicians, military and police officers, politico-administrative authorities and judicial authorities;
- Forests can contribute to local community and indigenous development by creating local jobs, ensuring the rational exploitation of forest resources (non-timber forest products), provision of environmental services for the whole of humanity and providing opportunities for eco-tourism and community conservation. Hence the urgency to monitor and control slash-and-burn farming, illegal logging of timber by both large and small-scale loggers, and bush fires;
- Community forests will only become real tools for development if: (1) the communities are organised into local development committees (officially recognised associations) and supported by the forestry administration and civil society, (2) they are sufficiently aware of the forestry law and its implementing regulations with regard to community forestry, (3) they are fully aware of the value and importance of the forest in terms of the current environmental challenges and (4) they are effectively involved in its sustainable management.

- The importance of rigorous monitoring of the whole artisanal logging chain by the government was also emphasised.

The 1st Provincial Forum of Mbandaka received wide media coverage via the local radio stations: Okapi, Ekanga, Mwinda, Liberté and through the Congolese Press Agency (ACP). Radio Okapi broadcast national reports on the meeting.

Conclusion

This first Provincial Forum in Equateur was widely followed by the political and administrative leaders in the Province, who were quickly won over to the idea of community forests as a way of alleviating rural poverty. Some new elements related to the distinctive features of the Province were identified that would need to be taken into consideration in the legal and institutional arrangements for community forest management in the DRC.

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