



Social Policies of Forest Concessionaries in West and Central Africa

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Preface

This brief report was written by Alain Karsenty (CIRAD) with the collaboration of Chloé Jégou (Sciences Po Grenoble) and Benjamin Singer (CIRAD/Sciences Po Paris) based on data obtained during the second quarter of 2008. It is primarily a desk study, prepared through interviews of company representatives, consultation of web documents and discussions with key individuals. This report is an extension of the study prepared also by Alain Karsenty on behalf of CIRAD in 2007 for Rights and Resources Initiative entitled “Overview of Industrial Forest Concessions and Concession-based Industry in Central and West Africa and Consideration of Alternatives” (http://www.rightsandresources.org/publication_details.php?publicationID=131).

contact them at the time of the study – many of the messages sent remain unanswered. However, we are confident we have identified the more progressive companies operating in the region, even though some gaps probably exist, especially among companies which are seeking or have obtained certification in Gabon, Cameroon or in Congo, and which are not mentioned here.

Finally, the reader must bear in mind that this paper aims to describe rather than evaluate progress made by concessionaires in West and Central Africa. Actual presence in the field was impossible given the number of concessions and countries covered in this article. As a result, most of the information presented here was provided by companies themselves through long-distance interviews. Further research should therefore focus on fieldwork that would “calibrate” this paper by balancing facts described here with the views of other local stakeholders.

Readers are invited to refer to this document for further information on the concession system in West and Central Africa, country data and company profiles.

This report cites a limited number of companies for their achievements in social relations within the enterprise and with local populations. Those companies operate also in a small number of countries, namely Gabon, Congo-Brazzaville, Ghana, Cameroon and DRC. On one hand, this recurrence reflects the heterogeneity of practices amongst the companies, most of which still have few social achievements to speak of, thus limiting the instances of progressive behaviour deserving to be cited. On the other hand, this report might not be equitable with some companies which may have made genuine efforts on social issues but which are not cited here due to the authors’ inability to

Introduction

Timber concessions in West and Central Africa have traditionally left a dismal record in terms of social policies that go back to the colonial period. However, these policies have undergone unprecedented change in a limited number of concessions over the past few years. While national legislation has required the implementation of comprehensive social policies by concessionaires for over a decade in some of the region’s countries, it is only in the past few years that such changes have actually taken place. As a result, timber concessionaires have begun to contribute to the welfare of local populations and



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their own staff. The fact that these efforts are mostly a result of the recent rush to FSC certification explains why this movement has been spearheaded by a small number of large, and mostly European, firms. So far, there is little indication that such policies are being adopted by other companies which are not seeking FSC certification, notably Asian ones.

This summary brief of a longer, fully annotated report¹ provides some insights into the myriad ways in which timber concessionaires have devised means of improving the welfare of local populations and their own staff and the collaboration with NGOs (Non-Governmental Organizations) that has been crucial in this context.

Background

Forest concessions cover approximately 50 million ha in the forested countries of Central Africa (Gabon, Congo-Brazzaville, DRC, Central

African Republic, Cameroon and Equatorial Guinea). This represents a quarter of the dense forest area which is mostly public-owned. In West Africa, according to FAO data, around 23 million hectares are earmarked for production purposes (one third of the total forest area), but not all those areas can be considered as concessions (land granted to companies with a long-term contract and a set of environmental and social obligations).

However, the land tenure situation is still not stabilized in a number of countries. French-speaking countries have yet to carry out the gazetting of forest, with the exception of Cameroon. Provisions for

community forestry exist in several countries, such as Cameroon, Guinea, Gabon, Liberia, DRC and Ghana. Concession areas often overlap with territories used on a more or less regular basis by different populations, from farmers to semi-nomadic populations, essentially hunter-gatherers usually referred to as “Pygmies.”

For a long time, concessionaires who received their logging rights from the government have been aware that they had to accommodate their social environment to avoid conflicts. The cornerstone of the interface between concessionaires and populations is the *cahier des charges* (contract specifications). Such *cahiers des charges* were automatically associated with the concession contract itself and embodied various requirements such as silvicultural and industrial obligations along with social ones. With the relative democratization of West and Central African countries in recent years, the multiplication of NGOs and the importance given internationally to the fate of forest-dwelling populations, the social dimension of the *cahiers des charges* now tends to prevail. Typically, a

1. Karsenty, Alain, Chloé Jégou and Benjamin Singer. 2008. “Social Policies of Forest Concessionaires in West and Central Africa.” <http://www.rightsandresources.org..>

cahier des charges contains provisions for delivering social investments benefiting local populations such as school and health care building or equipment, building local roads and bridges to facilitate access to villages, well-drilling and supplying of building materials to populations. In some cases, provisions are more extensive and those who benefit are not only local populations but also provincial authorities, local units of ministries in charge of forests and sometimes the central ministry itself. In addition, the *cahiers des charges* and especially social issues have become increasingly significant concession-related activities due to the implementation of long-term forest management plans that fix concessionaires to a given territory; and due to the development of forest certification in West and Central Africa.

In the last decade, forest management plans have been enforced in a significant proportion of concessions. It requires concessionaires to plan logging operations (mostly) on a 30-year basis and plan and announce its annual shifts within the concession in advance. With the development of local timber processing, many concessionaires have built a mill in the concession itself, reinforcing their long-term presence in a given territory. These changes allow local populations to hold the concessionaires accountable for the promises made to them.

In addition, forest certification has progressively become a necessary passport for timber on several western markets, and certifiers pay particular attention to the social dimension of the concessionaire's activities. This has been a powerful incentive for large companies seeking certification to engage seriously in social efforts, both for their employees, their *ayants droit* (relatives who are also entitled), and local populations living in the vicinity of the concession.

Yet, there remains much heterogeneity between companies on these questions, however. The forest industry has been restructured in several countries, and while certification is progressing, only some companies are engaged in the process, notably large European firms with demanding export markets. Efforts to raise social conditions within and around concessions are thus relatively limited to committed concessionaires, as illustrated by the expansion of FSC certification in the Congo Basin.

Social Policies

A number of policy instruments have been implemented to improve the relationship between concessionaires and local populations. Among these are participatory mapping activities inside concessions so as to locate and map the areas of activities of local populations inside and at the edge of concessions, i.e. areas of hunting, fishing, gathering of non-timber forest products (NTFPs) and areas of cultural importance (e.g., for initiation ceremonies). The exercise differs according to the type of population targeted: in the case of sedentary villagers (who are mostly Bantu), mapping generally involves identifying village ranges, known in French-speaking Africa as *finages*. In the case of semi-nomadic populations, notably Pygmies, the use of the forest, and thus mapping activities, focus much more on identifying certain species found throughout the forest rather than specific geographical zones.

While participatory mapping has been adopted by a number of companies, some have not considered it necessary or have been experiencing difficulties putting it into practice. In addition, mapping activities risk conflicts. In heavily forested, low-density population areas, the notion of "territory" does not bear the same significance than in other places. Space – and thus mapping exercises – may be defined as a network of points in which specific activities are carried out or as a

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myriad of small areas under the responsibility of given clans, but to which all nomadic populations have access.

Nevertheless, mapping inevitably results in drawing lines and defining territories with geographical limits (polygons) in the Western sense of the term, rather than retaining the subtle differences in which each ethnic group sees the space surrounding it. Such a concept of space favors privatization which may cause a group of villagers to suddenly exclude outsiders from using the territory which the maps states as “theirs” which has the potential of leading to conflicts.

While the creation of concessions can certainly be a recipe for trouble, the arrival of logging companies is also often hailed – above all by local populations themselves – as a significant economic opportunity in remote and landlocked areas. Potential benefits include direct and indirect employment opportunities on an individual basis and a range of socio-economic benefits to be negotiated with the company on a collective basis such as the equipment of health care centers, contribution to local education through building or funding schools etc. Such a partnership requires institutional structure where stakeholders can exchange their views.

A number of companies have formalized dialogue with local populations by setting up a range of committees that aim to (i) resolve conflicts and (ii)

discuss how to allocate social expenditures and deliveries by companies. These include giving food, building or contributing to the running of schools and health posts, and providing populations with facilities such as roads and drinking water supplies.

These same firms have also sought to improve the living and working conditions of their own staff. School building and equipment, health care and sports facilities (mainly football pitches) form the bulk of social deliveries and are often planned for by contract specifications (*cahier des charges*). In some cases, companies decide to hire teachers themselves to complete the educational team in existing schools. This often creates tensions between teachers hired by the company and others, namely those paid by the government or local council, especially as the former are paid higher and more regular wages.

Access to clean water and electricity is another critical aspect in this context. It is obviously in the self-interest of companies to contribute to the improvement of their employees' health, which in turn is correlated to water quality. One particular question for the companies is the perimeter of delivery, namely whether the target population should be entire neighboring villages or whether it should be limited to company staff and their immediate families, an issue that arises in Central Africa in densely populated areas with nearby urban development (often generated by the forest industry itself) and a network of public roads. Companies often differentiate between employees and entitled relatives (*ayants droit*) on the one hand and the rest of the population on the other.

One of the deleterious impacts of logging is the increase in poaching. With the sudden concentration of workers and their relatives in forested areas, hunting pressure increases significantly and in some regions there are signs

that wildlife has been seriously depleted, which deteriorates the livelihoods of local inhabitants who depend the most on forest products, especially Pygmies. To address this issue, companies have begun supplying their workers with sources of protein and some initiatives have been undertaken to develop local food production and animal breeding. In those cases where companies commit to providing a regular supply of meat and chicken to workers and sometimes local populations, the difficulty is to keep the cold chain during transportation across long distances and, thereafter. Since poaching is a major issue in FSC certification, companies seeking certification need to tackle the question effectively. Whilst some companies try to organize local breeding and/or cultivation initiatives.

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The health of employees in forest concessions is affected by a number of infectious diseases, particularly HIV/AIDS. In regions with few economic activities, the arrival of a timber company tends to attract many immigrants, including prostitution which has been known to develop rapidly under such circumstances. Companies are concerned by this situation as it has a significant impact on their labor force. Truck drivers commuting between large towns and forest sites are vectors of the disease; and skilled employees with higher wages and thus disposable income are particularly exposed to contract HIV, an issue which affects the companies' interests directly. Companies have been setting up a variety of health and screening programs, but a problem they are encountering is the extent of their health and prevention programs. Whilst companies are committed to take care of their employees' health

and that of their entitled relatives, they fear an increase in the number of demands due to an influx of people leading to a growth in the number of those "entitled". Yet it is difficult to close the door on the needs of other inhabitants of the area, especially in such a context of rampant deadly epidemics associated with deficient public health services.

Road construction and maintenance is a frequent request of populations in forested areas. In the near absence of government authorities, villagers look to the companies for this type of infrastructure. However, many environmental NGOs point out that the building of roads is associated with deforestation and large-scale poaching, and national legislation often stipulates that temporary roads must be closed once logging activities are finished in a given area, which often goes against the will of local populations. Companies have thus struck various kinds of compromise between these two contradictory requests. In Congo-Brazzaville for instance, CIB maintains main roads after the end of logging activities, whilst secondary axes are only maintained if specific villages benefit from it. Information was not available on these issues for other countries and companies, although it is believed that Wijma closed temporary roads inside one of its concessions, thus keeping to national legislation despite discontent among local populations on the issue.

Recruitment Policies and Working Conditions

Employment opportunities are the greatest expectations on the side of local populations when there is the prospect of a logging company moving in. In fact, it is often one of the only reasons why most inhabitants of forested areas initially welcome logging companies, despite the trouble their activities might cause to traditional lifestyles. Local employment is also an important criterion for

certification. Companies claim they give priority to locals but they frequently face difficulties finding skilled people locally, or even workers ready to comply with working obligations (such as regular presence at work, respect of working hours, etc.).

Logging and log transportation are dangerous activities, especially with poor road conditions. The risks increase for workers based in isolated areas, a long distance away from the nearest health facilities. As national legislations were not very constraining, concessionaires generally failed to invest significantly in this domain, resulting in a large number of accidents from which workers often never recovered. Seeing fellers removing the security device from their chainsaw (because it made the machine heavier and more inconvenient to use) was once a common sight. The situation only improved, notably in large companies, with more constraining legislation and the current trend towards certification.

Whilst the situation has undoubtedly improved in some large companies – especially those which have undertaken a certification process – limited information is available for medium-sized enterprises and a number of large companies. In addition, subcontracting for logging and other risky and dangerous operations is quite common, yet these employees have yet to benefit from the same improvements in working conditions that fully-fledged staff members of many concessionaires now enjoy.

Companies willing to improve their social records often lack human skills for dealing with social issues. As a result, timber concessionaires have often turned to social and environmental NGOs for help in these issues. Partnerships with specialized NGOs have thus proliferated, either with local NGOs or with national branches of large international NGOs. Most partnerships have been struck with environmental NGOs such as WWF, WCS or AWS

(African Wildlife Society) rather than social-oriented ones – even though most environmental NGOs also have strong social concerns. This sometimes entails a conflict of objectives with the practices of local populations, but overall these partnerships have brought improvement to what has widely been regarded as the weakest aspect in Africa's concession-based forest management system.

Conclusion

Nowadays, social issues are considered with greater attention by a certain number of companies than they once were. This trend is doubtlessly linked to certification sought by large companies which sell the bulk of their timber to European markets as achievements described here are relatively recent and obviously correlated to the rush towards certification observed in West and Central Africa. All the companies cited in the full report are either FSC-certified or actively engaged in a certification process. In this respect, certification incentives definitely appear to have a greater effect than national regulations themselves.

Within this select group of companies, however, achievements are uneven, with CIB (Congolaise Industrielle du Bois), which operates in Northern Congo-Brazzaville, arguably having gone furthest down this path and achieved impressive results worthy of respect.

It remains to be seen whether social policies of the companies mentioned here are in fact an anticipation of what African national or local governments might implement in the near future. The provision of some social goods has been viewed as the companies substituting governmental actions which can be seen as a diversion from people's legitimate demands for more accountable and credible governments. It is certainly a response to the "immaturity" of democratic processes and of (local and national)

government inefficiencies in Central Africa, but could also be a factor that contributes to perpetuating this situation.

One might be struck by the relative modesty of most achievements. Logging companies defend their social record by pointing out that industrial forestry in Africa is not a highly capitalized activity and the profitability of this activity is not particularly large, except for those few companies which recently enjoyed significant profits. The financial situation of most companies does not compare with the mining industry which has benefited from soaring prices in much greater proportions than the timber sector has ever experienced. Yet the most advanced companies showed what is possible in terms of social policies and are setting new de facto standards, which might hopefully spill over into national policies and be generalized in the future content of *cahiers des charges*. This is already the case in Gabon: after years of voluntary financial contributions based on the area traditionally used by communities (*finage*) overlapping with concessions, the government is preparing a decree to generalize this mechanism to all other concessions in the country.

Finally, it is worth noting that the issue of “indigenous populations” has only made its way to the top of the agenda since the mid-2000s. Nowadays, the issue is widely discussed thanks to FSC criteria 2 and 3 (devoted to the situation of indigenous people) and, since the complaint made by Pygmies groups in DRC to the World Bank Inspection Panel, on certain aspects of the World Bank forest policy. This shows that the social issue has multiple facets and indicates that the land tenure issue will require innovative solutions to

maintain equitable access for all populations to forest resources in densely forested areas.

Community forests were arguably conceived – in Cameroon, Gabon and DRC – as miniature timber concessions, with an exclusive area of user rights strictly separated from other tenure categories. Such a solution is not practical for “Pygmies” who cover great distances in their hunting and gathering activities. Such lifestyles cannot be accommodated in narrow definitions of exclusive rights – even though reserved areas could be considered as they enable to secure some basic rights. Several categories of tenure are already known to overlap, notably traditional areas of user rights of Bantu villagers (called *finages* in Gabon), the huge ranges of semi-nomadic groups, concessions, and the administrative boundaries of local councils. Finding equitable solutions to make these different types of tenure coexist will require acknowledging these overlaps in land tenure rights and trying to organize them in a more coherent manner.

Acronyms

CIB – Congolaise Industrielle du Bois

CIRAD – Centre for International Cooperation in Agricultural Research for Development

DRC – Democratic Republic of the Congo

FAO – United Nations Food and Agricultural Organization

FSC – Forest Stewardship Council

NGO – non-governmental organization

NTFP – non-timber forest product

Photo credit: K. Erdlenbruch

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