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## The forest sector in the green economy in Africa

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## Sustainable Forest Management based on State Practice in Central Africa Countries

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### Summary

*This piece of writing briefly reviews the interpretation of the concept of sustainable forest management (SFM) deduced from state practice in some Central Africa countries. This assessment of SFM practices draws upon the earlier and highly variable definitions of sustainable development. It demonstrates that some progress has been made in terms of the more nuanced meanings of SFM now adopted by States in Central Africa. This reflects the fact that it is difficult to find a good balance between the three functions (economic, social and environmental) which structure the concept of SFM. Congo Basin countries seek to translate SFM by institutionalizing and implementing forest concessions, protected areas and community forestry. However, these efforts have been hindered by some governance shortcomings.*

### Background

In 1991 Sharachchandra Lele published a review of the concept of 'Sustainable Development' (SD) which by then had

been widely adopted by both governmental and nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) as a new paradigm of development. This critical review highlighted the lack of consistency in its interpretation, and a number of weaknesses which had led to inadequacies and contradictions in policy making in *inter alia* the forest sector (Lele, 1991). The concept of SD resulted in a proliferation of meanings – already over forty definitions by the late 1980s (Pearce et al., 1989). These did not reflect a simple exercise in academic or practical clarification but a highly political process of 'different interests with different substantive concerns trying to stake their claims in the sustainable development territory' (Dryzek, 1997).

Balancing the economic, social and ecological functions of tropical forests is challenging. Consequently, forest sustainability is often reflecting conflicts of interests and power unbalanced amongst forest stakeholders (Davenport et al., 2010). As a result, Tladi (2007) proposes a variation in approaches to integrating the three pillars of sustainability that have emerged from the SD discourse. These various approaches are distinguishable on the basis of the three functions that take priority in the case of trade-offs between them i.e. in terms of the economic, environmental and social welfare benefits of forests.

Central Africa is the second largest continuous block of rainforests on the planet after the Amazon Basin. Although degraded in some areas, forest cover is relatively well preserved overall (Eba'a Atyi et al., 2009). In 1999, the Heads of State of Central Africa sub-region expressed their joint commitment to work towards SFM through the Yaoundé Declaration. This positive political will to promote SFM was further shored up in 2005 by the adoption of the Brazzaville Treaty on Conservation and SFM in Central Africa. This article reviews the current meaning of SFM based on actions of individual countries within the Congo Basin.

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It draws on legal materials and conduct of national governments.

### **Sustainable Forest Management in Central Africa**

The concept SFM, calls for a realistic balance between the economic, social and ecological functions of forests in the development of policies, attendant regulations and implementation strategies. The achievement of this balance is often tricky in view of the trade-offs between these three functions of sustainability. This is why the authors prefer to use the explanatory model of Tladi (2007) on the variable integration of the underlying functions of the concept of SD. To further clarify his model, Tladi (2007) provides two explanations. First, SD is based on the integration of the three underlying functions of sustainability. Consequently, there is no exclusion of any of the three functions. The economic and social functions have an anthropogenic origin because both place human needs over and above longer-term ecological sustainability.

The transposition of Tladi's theoretical explanatory model of SD to the forest sector in Central Africa sub-region suggests the following: given that the concept of SFM includes the ecological, social and economic functions, there are three variations of forest sustainability. These are determined by the three functions of forests, in the event of trade-offs between them. The first variation presupposes that in a forest area where the management option favours economic returns as for example the case with most forest concessions - the economic function tends to prevail over the two others; but without excluding them completely. In reality, the aim is to reduce the social and ecological functions in the case of conflict with the dominant economic function in forest concessions. The second variation implies that in a forest area where the SFM option is social with the aim of prioritizing devolved authority for forest management - as is the case with community forest and Co-management of some forest areas - the social function may be prioritized more than the two others. In the case of trade-offs, the

ecological and economic function must yield to the social function in this context. The third variation presupposes that in a forest area intended for conservation, - such as protected areas the ecological function will take priority over the other two functions.

The variation in the integration of the functions of SFM derived from Tladi's explanatory model of sustainable development tends to reflect with States practice as outlined in most legislation in Congo Basin countries. In most of the forest legislation and attendant regulations currently in force in several Central African countries, a fundamental distinction is made between forest concessions; protected areas and community forest. These forest classifications reflect to certain extent, the distinction of three functions of SFM through the allocation of forest areas for specific purposes. Forests are commonly classified according to their purpose or use (Bigombé & Dabiré, 2002; CBFP, 2006). Production forests such as forest concessions have a prevailing economic function. They provide economic benefits to private sector operators and generate taxes for the State to help public finance and other development activities and also a portion of Forest Annual Fees Area to some local councils and communities (Cerutti *et al.*, 2010). Accordingly, it would be logical to give priority to economic production activities in a forest allocated for timber harvesting, in the case of a trade-off between the three underlying functions of sustainable management. However, this does not mean that the social and ecological functions should be systematically banned. In fact, the difficulty to find a suitable balance between the three functions of sustainable forest management may actually favour the adoption of a legislative/regulatory process to allocate/classify forest areas. In contrast, in a forest area earmarked for protection, the ecological function should prevail in the event of trade-offs with two other functions (economic and social). In effect, in any type of protected areas, the conservation of plant and wildlife species should take the upper hand over social and economic values. But

again, this does not imply the total exclusion of the social and economic functions. In some countries efforts have been made to foster greater engagement with communities living around protected areas with the aim of ensuring more effective protection whilst allowing small-scale extraction of Non wood forest products to meet subsistence needs and household income. The aim is to ensure that all stakeholders around the protected area comply with the main purpose of protecting the forest area by giving priority to the ecological function.

Another example is that in most Congo Basin countries, there is a clear distinction between the permanent forest estate and the non-permanent forest estate (CBFP, 2006). The latter is reserved mainly for agro-forestry and community forestry activities with local communities. The permanent forest estate is intended for production and conservation purposes. Tladi's explanatory model can also be applied at the ground level. From this perspective, it is possible to note that stakeholders in a forest arena act according to their main interests. However, given that such interests are often conflicting, management and use decisions have to be in line with the nature of the legal classification of the forest to be used. In the context of a protected area set up where the surrounding local population claim historical rights to the land the theory of co-management of natural resources (Borrini-Feyerabend et al., 2004) can enable the various stakeholders (park managers, local communities, NGOs, and the local and national government administration) to arrive at a minimum consensus which can reconcile the main objective of the forest (conservation), with the secondary objective :promotion of the rights of local communities (Haller & Galvin, 2008). In practice, the blurred boundaries between protected areas and customary agroforestry landscapes are porous, and subject to continuous re-negotiation (Wardell & Lund, 2006). This does not imply abandoning the other forest functions, but rather seeks to

find solutions and trade-offs between them. In the case of certifying a forest concession, the evaluator first tries more or less to give priority to the economic function before considering the ecological and the socio-cultural functions. This was confirmed by comparing the social function inside and outside a certified concession to two other concessions without certification managed by three different economic operators (Cerutti et al., 2011). This comparative study showed that quality of living standards and the respect of the rights of the local communities and national employees had not significantly improved even in the certified concession. Social claims persist even in forests that have been certified in spite of many promises made during forest certification (Cerutti et al., 2011).

#### Concluding remarks

The transposition of Tladi's model drawing on the concept of sustainable development to SFM in Congo Basin countries demonstrates that some progress has been made to translate such generic principles into operational principles at the ground level. State SFM practices distinguish between the economic, social and ecological forest functions in most national forest legislation and regulation, with forest areas generally allocated for specific purposes. The key task is how to achieve a balanced approach to SFM according to each of the three priorities outlined by Tladi in the different forest areas. According Eba'a Atyi et al. (2009), the progress of Central Africa countries towards SFM comes from the implementation of forest management plans, advances in forest certification and trends of greater involvement of forest dependent communities in SFM, as well as the sharing of benefits generated by all stakeholders. However, these efforts have been to date undermined in the Congo Basin countries by continuing governance challenges (especially illegal logging, corruption) and the unregulated operations of the informal sector, coupled with limited access to information.

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