Operationalizing gender equity and inclusion in forest management decision-making mechanisms

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Key messages

- Decision-making initiatives led solely by external forest stakeholders (organizing local community stakeholders) can make the meaningful involvement of women and marginalized groups difficult, if not impossible.
- Self-initiated community groups, however, are able to leverage authentic collaborative engagements, empowering women to speak up when decisions are being made.
- To ensure effective participation, women need to be empowered to become agents of change through taking on, both formally and informally, strategic roles in community groups making forest-related decisions.
- Forest certification requires new approaches to ensure the effective participation of all stakeholders; this includes promoting the use of gender quotas as a transitional mechanism, not as an end-goal; the development of local gender-sensitive leadership pathways; and taking a human rights approach to participation.

Introduction

The notion of participation in decision making is more complex than just the right to say yes or no. It requires that all men and women are also involved in the development of policies and decision-making processes that affect them.

Participation is a core human right, and a fundamental principle under international environmental frameworks. It is enshrined into political and legal instruments set up to manage forests in the Congo Basin region. The Central African Forest Commission (Commission des Forêts d'Afrique Centrale) is one example of this, with its sub-regional directives on the participation of local and indigenous populations and NGOs in the sustainable management of Central African Forests (Assembe-Mvondo, 2013)[1]. Such directives, although non-binding, apply to all forest-related activities carried out within COMIFAC Member States or

within the COMIFAC institutional framework. Following such guidance, the Republic of Congo, the focus of this brief, enshrined the principle of participation into its legal texts (such as the Forest Code 2000[2] and Law No. 5-2011, which promotes and protects indigenous people's rights[3]). The Forest Stewardship Council (FSC) equally views participation as integral to enabling good governance and sustainable management of forests[4]. The FSC certification program incorporates participation as a fundamental pillar in its vision, statements and social policy (FSC 2012a). Yet despite the inclusion of participation in legal texts and policy

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1   The Plan de Convergence adopted in 2005, and the sub-regional directives adopted in 2010, provide guidelines on the participation of local and indigenous populations and NGOs for the sustainable management of Central African Forests.

2   Law No 16-2000 (20 November 2000) established the Forest Code in the Republic of the Congo, providing for the right of participation for individuals, local communities and organizations, as well as NGOs involved in forest management.

3   Law No 5-2011 (5 February 2011) aims to promote and protect indigenous people's rights, and recognize them as integral stakeholders and beneficiaries in the management of forest ecosystems.

4   The requirement for inclusiveness is directly reflected in the:
- FSC FPIC Guidelines (FSC 2012b).
- Global Criterion 4.4 of the FSC Principles and Criteria for Forest Stewardship (P&C) (FSC 2002:5).
- FSC Forest Stewardship Standard for the Congo Basin Region, including the Republic of the Congo (FSC 2012c:40).
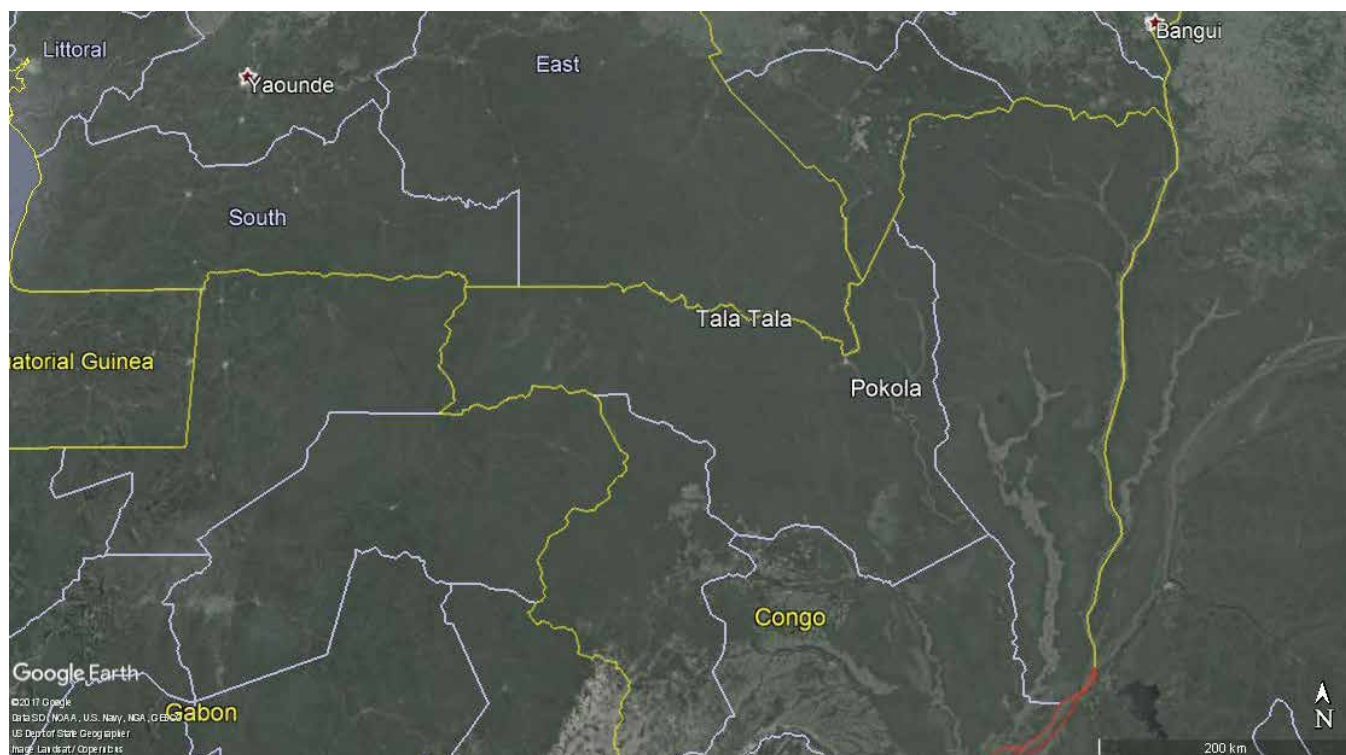
Figure 1. Map showing the studied Forest Managements Units (UFA) locations.

initiatives, there is no guarantee that effective participative practices will take place.

"Participation is often associated with the distribution of power in society, as it is power which enables a group to determine which needs and whose priorities need to be considered" (Sithole 2002). Such distribution of power is closely linked to complex social processes, institutions, structures and dynamics; effective participation can therefore be significantly hindered by sociocultural, political and economic prejudices. When we examine decision-making practices related to forest and land resources management, we are faced with the question of how to ensure that forest certification can effectively ensure that wide-ranging user groups are able to voice their concerns and needs regarding forest resource management.

This brief provides a summary of a study that explored inclusivity within the diverse decision-making mechanisms[5] of certified and non-certified forested areas in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (Figure 1). The study focused on the forest management decision-making processes of four villages in the north of the Republic of the Congo; it examined practices in two villages connected to FSC-certified forests, and two villages connected to forests which were not certified. In addition to examining

inclusivity in decision making[6], the study examined perceived barriers to women's participation. The brief also provides recommendations to support women's participation in decision making, based on the research evidence.

Methodology

The study focused on four villages, within Pokola and Tala-Tala, two distinct Forest Management Units (Unité Forestière d'Aménagement - UFAs[7]) in the Sangha region of northern Republic of the Congo (Figure 1, Table 1).

Study sites were selected according to several criteria including: forest management type; ethnicity; village size, location and road access; and the author's time, budgetary and logistical constraints. All four villages are deeply socially stratified with two major ethnic groups: the Bantus, who are mainly sedentary farmers, and the Baka, who are traditionally hunter-gatherers. Data was collected through semi-structured interviews with 18 participants in the Pokola UFA, and 41 participants in the Tala-Tala UFA. Interviews focused on understanding livelihood strategies, resources, incomes and the typology of village-level

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5   Formal and informal structures and processes at local and district level allowing for decision-making in relation to UFA forest and village management.

6   At the time of the study, in FSC certified units under the FSC's Principles & Criteria, gender balance was not a requirement in forest management-related decision-making structures.

7   In the Republic of Congo, the Unités Forestières d'Aménagement (UFAs) are administrative divisions on which forest management is based; it is the common term employed in forest management plans in the Congo Basin region.

Table 1. Population size of the studied villages (including children).

UFA	Village	Women	Men	Total population	Total households
FSC UFA Pokola	Djaka	54	61	115	40
	Matoto	77	73	150	32
NON-FSC UFA Tala-Tala	Egaba	172	158	330	44
	Bolozo	187	171	358	56

FSC = Forest Stewardship Council, UFA = Forest Management Unit.

decision making, as well as gaining a broad understanding of the contextual setting. The typology analysis drew on Agarwal's framework (2001) to collect information about meeting attendance and the level of participation. In addition, female-only focus group discussions were conducted with a total of 133 women, whose ages ranged from 13 to 75. The objective was to capture the most salient perceived causes of women's marginalization from participation in the public sphere. Apparent barriers to participation were drafted from household interview responses, then grouped into a list of factors and presented to female participants by the research team. These factors were discussed by the women and research team together. The team also conducted field observations and informal discussions while walking in and around the villages and through the forest to reach some plantations.

Evidence and experience

Externally-driven versus self-initiated decision-making structures

In the study, we found that community engagement was driven by both external and internal processes. In the context of this study, external processes refer to decision-making structures designed outside of the community, with external motivations and strict rules of membership based on external actors' expectations (e.g. District Council or Local Development Fund). Conversely, internal processes are designed at grassroots level within the community, with organic motivations and rules of membership that the community decides for itself (e.g. community self-help groups or associations).

In the FSC-certified unit (Pokola) decision-making structures relating to forest management and community projects were characterized by externally-driven processes and agencies; they had strict rules of entry and membership governing them. Implemented voluntarily by the logging company as part of FSC certification, the Local Development Fund (Fond de Développement Local - FDL) was established by governmental decree and managed through the multi-stakeholder District Council, the Management Committee and the Evaluation Committee. These structures, on which the villages depend for decisions and funding over community projects, operate within a male-dominated environment; women's

voices and motivation to participate were thus limited. Equally, the existence of a quota system (at least one woman participating) for the Pokola District Council was merely symbolic to achieve the minimum legal gender requirement mandated by law, as well as the forest management plan of the certified unit. Traditional villages' committees[8] also had only male members. In the non-FSC-certified forest unit (Tala Tala) where there was no management plan and FDL, villages were characterized by more organic and informal decision-making processes, such as local associations and informal women's discussions groups that women had created for themselves. Here women were more likely to voice their opinions and be actively engaged, as well as be more cohesive with one another. Due to their increased visibility, responsibilities and public speaking skills at village level, some women felt more capable and at ease speaking up for themselves in male-dominated meetings. As a result, female members of associations were more likely to interact with male-only village committees.

Findings concluded that externally-driven mechanisms for community engagement, such as those seen in the Pokola UFA, did not suffice to democratically represent women's needs and aspirations, take into consideration gender-differentiated opportunities and needs, or promote the full and effective participation of women. They also called into question the social reliability, legitimacy and representativeness of traditional village committees when, for example, they act as the unique interface between communities and logging companies. The committees emphasized strongly-rooted relationships and traditional hierarchies between certain types of actors, around whom power gravitates. Such structures reinforce formal exclusion and marginalization of women and indigenous peoples (Gupte 2004). For this reason, externally-driven committees, that disable any sense of shared values, need to be counter-balanced with self-developed community structures that can provide the shared goals, vision and commitment necessary for internal cohesion and village well-being.

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8   A traditional village committee is a decision-making structure often composed of a President, a Treasurer, a Secretary and Advisors elected by the community. Its aim is to oversee the village's public affairs. In the studied units, such committees act as the unique interface of communication between communities and a logging company.

Different degrees of participation

The research study showed that meeting attendance and consultation did not necessarily lead to maximized participation amongst women. Where some women were consulted, their voices did not necessarily count in village-level decisions. Impacting factors included social status (whether a woman was Bantu or indigenous) and rank; women whose voices counted were those holding important positions at village level or having family ties with traditional leaders and important male figures. However, some of the more vocal women, who were able to influence others, were also members or leaders of a self-initiated network or group. Their involvement in collaborative action made them feel stronger, more valuable and capable of sharing ideas and propositions with their community. In some cases, the increased confidence and capacity these women experienced had a domino effect on their peers; less vocal women were motivated to speak up after seeing other women being vocal. This boosted their self-confidence and enhanced their ability to articulate demands and contribute meaningfully to the village in strategic roles as well. This suggested that leaders of women's groups, and the groups themselves, can have a positive effect on representation and influence village-level decision making. We also found that the presence of informal women's groups was beneficial for the community integration and self-confidence of Baka women, who

felt improvements in these areas. Such self-developed initiatives encouraged a sense of self-worth, ownership and group identity, by leveraging authentic collaborative engagements. They also helped weaken rigid discriminatory social norms, by showing that women can be actively engaged group leaders outside their households, and can develop project plans associated with successful activities. It was also evident that villages without self-initiated groups also lacked cohesion, ownership and collective effort among women, and did not have the opportunity to challenge traditional hierarchies and leadership. This suggested that an absence of self-initiated community engagement structures perpetuates women's passivity in decision making, limiting their voices and potential for future participation.

Cultural and social norms as the major barriers to participation

Cultural and social norms were perceived by women in both UFAs as the main limitations to their full and active participation. Traditions and customs, which define a set of behavioral standards to which women need to adhere, were acknowledged as major reasons behind the perpetuation of a patriarchal culture that restrains women's participation. In the FSC-certified unit, women often reported that they did not feel confident and capable of talking in front of male community members (Figure 2).
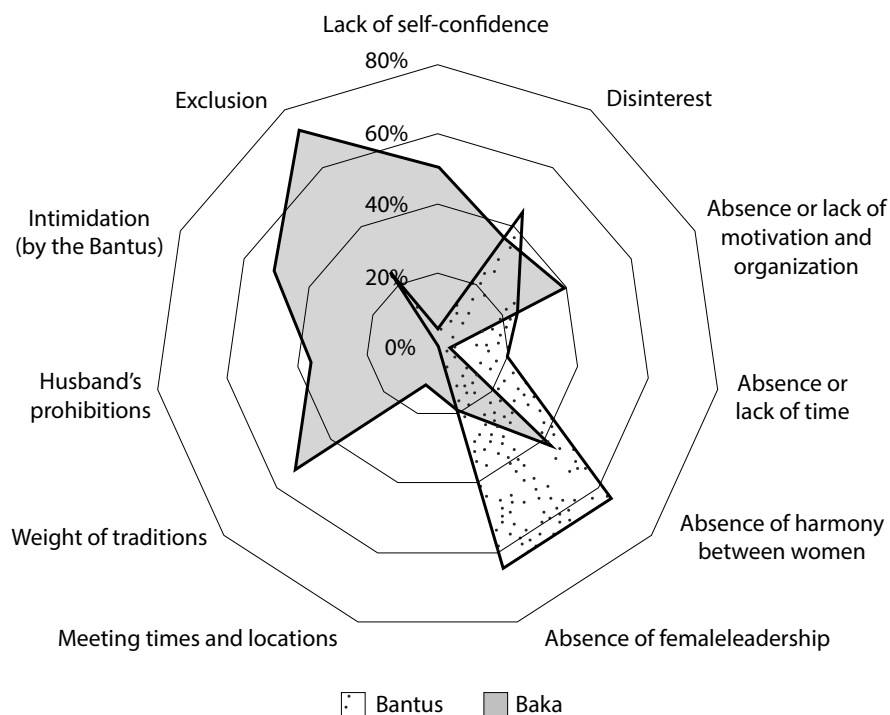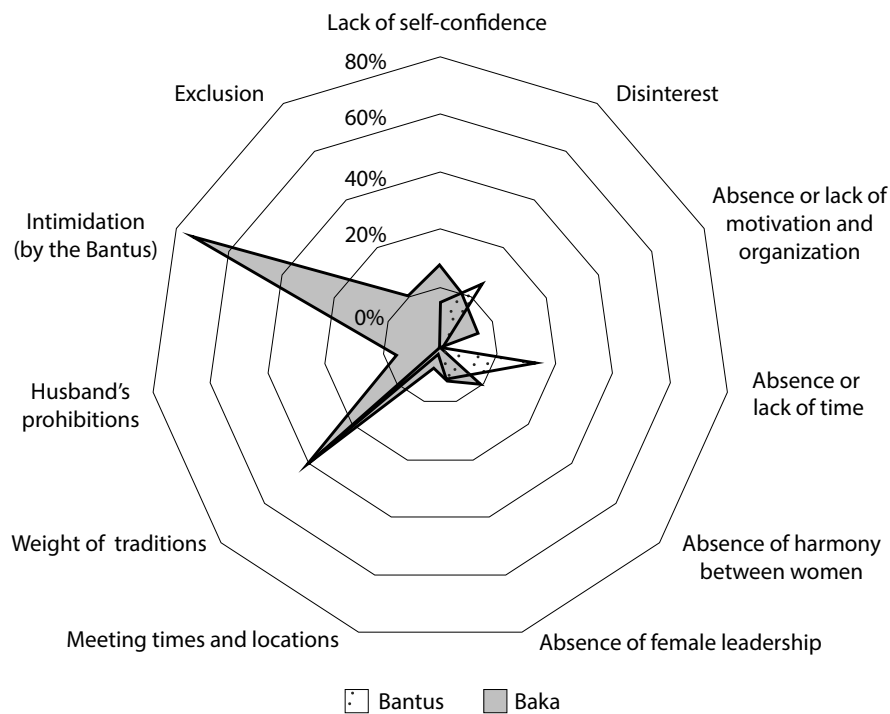

Figure 2. Perceived barriers to women's participation, according to women in Djaka and Matoto (FSC-certified UFA).

Figure 3. Perceived barriers to women's participation, according to women in Egaba and Bolozo (non-FSC-certified UFA).

They equally felt that their primary role was domestic and productive (cleaning, cooking, planting, harvesting, and looking after the children). They complained of strict rules restricting them from traditional decision-making structures. However, in the villages where self-initiated groups existed, women were seen to challenge those gender norms and take on new responsibilities at village level, such as developing a solidarity fund[9] or promoting sustainable agroforestry practices. This in turn helped weaken restrictive norms and negative male attitudes towards women's participation. However, women's access to strategic positions in these groups seemed to be shaped by local social connections. Women with a higher social and economic status, such as those with strong relationships with traditional leaders and influential male figures, were those principally favored by village elites and leaders. Individual interviews also confirmed that intimidation of Baka women (an ethnic minority) by dominant Bantu women undermined their participation in village decision-making processes (Figure 3); it decreases their confidence, motivation and interest in village affairs, perpetuating their historical and perceived inferiority.

Conflict and a lack of cohesion was another barrier to women's participation. The villages with no self-initiated

groups also experienced conflicts between women; these villages reported a general lack of female unity, solidarity, leadership and motivation (Figure 2). The coincidence between the existence of conflicts and the absence of self-initiated community groups implies that self-initiated groups had an overall positive effect on the villages' reported cohesion and motivation to act as a community together. These self-initiated groups also provided additional channels for informal dispute resolution between community members.

Recommendations and conclusion

Scale up women-only and mixed-gender initiatives for an effective multi-level approach

Addressing barriers faced by women and marginalized groups, and in particular enhancing their capacity for agency, is critical for achieving effective participation. This requires a multi-level approach that involves encouraging the development of self-driven initiatives, which are able to challenge established hierarchies and traditional exclusion patterns (such as membership rules or social norms) that are typical of externally-driven forest management processes. Opening up discussion spaces and self-help groups for women and the less vocal is one step toward

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9   This is a cooperative which aims to promote intra-village solidarity and develop sustainable agricultural practices. The cooperative funds, collected through member fees, are redistributed to members most in need (for events like childbirth, sickness, burial, domestic accidents, etc.)

facilitating their active participation (Cornwall 2003; Pokharel 2004 and 2008; Pokharel and Byrne 2009; Siripurapu and Geores 2016). Such initiatives could build collective and individual capacity for participation, cooperation, and eventually leadership, by providing a safe interface for women to gain experience before taking on more active roles in externally-driven mixed-gender groups, like the Local Development Fund or other committees.

Use gender quotas to help local and district committees transition towards gender balance and equity, rather than as an end-goal

Increasing women's representation in forest management committees alone may not be sufficient to encourage full and influential female participation, since such positive discrimination does not directly address the deeply-entrenched circumstances, attitudes or psychological barriers causing the gender imbalance. Quotas are an important entry point for bringing women into decision-making positions and encouraging reform, but they are not an end goal (Hust 2002). Also, as seen in the case study, symbolic quotas do not guarantee that elected women will be able to effectively promote other women's interests, and it is unclear what the common benefit might be without a strong women's movement. However, a quota system could be used as a temporary measure to increase women's public participation in decision making, until women self-mobilize and gender-balanced processes are reached and sustained.

Incorporate into forest resource certification standards a human rights-based approach to the concept of participation

The notion of participation is firmly rooted in international law and conventions. It is a basic procedural[10] human right included in treaties and international conventions, providing actions for the realization of fundamental rights, such as the rights to life, property, self-determination and a healthy environment. The right to participation seeks the free, active and meaningful involvement of individuals, groups or communities in made decisions that affect their rights. Thus, it is apparent that participation can be best understood and implemented from a human rights perspective (Global Initiative 2014). Although a human rights framework does not specifically refer to how to ensure and implement participation, it can provide guidance and a common understanding of appropriate minimum standards by which to measure the quality of participation. Accordingly, there are three fundamental questions to consider: who is participating, what are people participating in, and how are people being included in decision-making processes. The process of participation should take into consideration local power structures and dynamics, as well as be sensitive to gender and diversity.

Foster development of local gender-sensitive leadership pathways

Leadership pathways could include promoting women's access to education and skills, but also the provision of leadership training, skills, and information for both men and women (Coleman and Mwangi 2013). By fostering these types of opportunities, women and other marginalized groups may increasingly participate in a meaningful and effective way, to yield lasting results in participation and leadership. It is also recommended that barriers and opportunities to women's participation in governance are systematically monitored and reviewed at local, national and regional levels by forest stakeholders. This can contribute to strengthening the existing knowledge database of policies and practices, enriching the debate on policy options, and developing an accurate policy focus that takes into account regional variations.

Acknowledgments

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10   Other procedural rights include the right to information, to participation, and to justice.

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