
Central African forestry administrations: are they at the service of the peoples involved?

Since 1990, a lot of noise has been made about the forests of the Congo Basin, both good and bad. Now a new environmental wave is descending on the Democratic Republic of Congo, of a scope very similar to that of the “Zaire boom” in the seventies. However, the question is: are the Central African forestry administrations -generally subject to insidious sociological factors- aligned with the aspirations and needs regarding welfare of the region’s inhabitants?

First of all, for an African it is an act of bravery to restore to African people the visibility of their forestry administrations and this for various reasons. Of these, the first two are that “those who objectify reality are not much appreciated” and that “foreign experts are still those who determine priority fields of intervention in forest ecosystems.” Africans need to define for themselves the forestry administrations for their people, but this has not yet happened.

Two functions of forestry administrations in Central Africa

We are considering two of the main functions of forestry administrations in Central Africa: the production of timber and the conservation of biological diversity. In spite of the diversity of forms under which they are presented, these functions are not fulfilled in a satisfactory way. For instance all (or nearly all) the cities mainly consume waste from sawmills; many cities lack timber even though the countries export it; the construction of subregional or regional markets for legal forestry products is taking for ever, while protection of the European market is being strengthened.

For its part, biological diversity conservation sets problems, even when it stems from noble ambitions and even though experiments are being done in this field. Over a decade has gone by since the launching of the first participatory management programmes for protected areas executed under the auspices of international organizations for the conservation of nature. However most of them do not seem to contribute to the preservation of biological diversity or to improve the living conditions of the peoples directly involved. This is demonstrated in a recent analysis of the various projects for the management of protected areas in Central Africa (Ndinga, 2005). Not only do the neighbouring inhabitants of these areas continue to have food, health and educational problems, but they are also subject to restrictions that upset their interior vision of harmony between the elements and their surroundings without their participation in the protection of natural resources materializing, despite the loud announcements made by international organizations.

All this invites us to reflect. Historically it is a recognized fact that, to find answers to the problems of the forestry sector, we must resort to people who are capable of benefiting from what the various sciences have to offer, (law, political, economic, social, historical and geographical sciences, as well as natural science regarding the environment and in particular, forests). We consider that this is the point where forestry could favour the creation of conditions providing an opportunity for the adjustment of Central African forestry administrations to the needs and aspirations of the peoples directly involved. Only the capacity of the African people to reflect for themselves on the diversity of aspects involved in their forests will make it possible, in the first place to contribute to get forestry

administrations to adjust to these needs and, secondly to end the dissemination of foreign ideas, traditions and approaches on biological diversity in their countries.

Models of decision-making processes in the forestry administrations of Central Africa

Another major problem that should be addressed jointly is the rationalization of decision-making processes in the forestry administrations of Central Africa.

On one side are the forestry administrations operating on the basis of a sort of “rationalized neo-patrimonialism.” These resemble a set of more or less rival tribal and/or political entities and individuals, considered as so many other subsystems and structures surrounding the Head of State. Their main type of action consists in updating routines (traditional forestry operations), redistributing positions and forestry resources and seeking some kind of credibility in the eyes of capitalist partners and international NGOs. In this case, the central proposal for the decision to be taken is the result of presidential intervention.

At the other extreme are the forestry administrations that resort to extortion and violent and direct depredation of forestry resources. This refers to the cases of the most extreme and bloody political systems and to the “war lords.” The forestry administration is then a set of tribal, military and/or political entities structured around the war lords; the main actions are then manifestations of violent impulses, updating of routines, extortion and direct depredation of forestry resources and the orchestration of fund providers and international NGOs. The decision is a result of war lord intervention.

Between these two extremes lies rational forestry administration. Even though the Head of State continues to be the main actor, forestry administration is structured around State institutions, the regulations governing them and the nation’s values: the dominant type of action is a search for a response to social demand for forestry products and environmental services. The decision is a calculated solution to a strategic national problem.

It should be remembered that these are only models. Evidently the universe of forestry administrations in Central Africa is heterogeneous. Very often it is a mixture of “rationalized neo-patrimonialists,” “war lords” and rational actors and all have a dominating role to a greater or lesser degree. However, models enable us to better understand the sociology of forestry administrations in Central Africa and their internal decision processes. This basis enables us to reflect on the rationalization of such processes.

Internal factors influencing decisions

From this standpoint, it becomes evident that the significant factors influencing the decisions of Central African forestry administrations need to be visualized. “Neo-patrimonialism” privileges deviations from standards and conformism; this has been so abundantly demonstrated that it is possible to affirm for example that John Maynard Keynes would never have made himself a career in such administrations. On the other hand, the history and identity of Central African people, although notable in many aspects, were open for a long time to networks of more or less confessable activities. It is for this reason that many Central African people, whether or not they be men/women of State, allude to their will to put themselves at the service of their country but, in fact, continue to legitimise deviations, offering scant resistance and developing strategies to atomize forestry institutions and competing among themselves to obtain the rank of interlocutors with foreign experts, international organizations, or capitalist organizations.

Thus, contrary to what some may think, the significant internal factors to improve decision-making in the forestry administrations of Central Africa are not only quantitative (the amount of personnel and the importance of financial means) but also qualitative, referring to the quality of the people and the institutional context. For example the forestry administration in the Congolese Republic, which in 1960 did not include any professional foresters, now has over 200; its budget, insignificant in 1960 is to-day various millions of CFA francs. Nearly all the Central African countries have evolved similarly. However, forest management in these countries is presently much worse than in 1960 if one considers the generalization of corruption, forest degradation, the decrease in wildlife or violence within forestry administrations.

External factors affecting decision-making

In addition to the above-mentioned factors, globalization and the insertion of Central African countries in increasingly dense networks of international, friendly or shared interest links have positive but also coercive effects that weaken their commitment with the forest ecosystem cause. This is due to western hegemony and to the culture of international relations sociology in the western countries and to the African people's scant feelings of nationalism.

To this is added the fact that diplomacy has considerable influence on decision-making processes in Central African forestry administrations. Official western diplomacy, in spite of appearing to be of a "generous nature," has another aspect that should be made known, particularly in the field of forestry competitiveness. In fact, this diplomacy is usually at the service of the forces which, in the past, caused the weakening of the structures and impoverishment of the region; forces whose primary concern is personal interest but that orchestrate the power of their own State and international conventions; forces that, in the field of forest conservation develop transversal strategies in a struggle against other powers. So far Central African diplomacy has been absolutely disorderly and impotent and has left forest ecosystems (almost) entirely open to actors that influence the decisions of African forestry administrations towards bowing to their interests.

As a complement to official diplomacy we find "non-governmental diplomacies." These do not limit themselves to activities carried out through organizations of the same name. They have existed for centuries, have multiple dimensions and directions and have numerous and diverse actors. It should be noted that here "fluency of speech" and rhetoric contribute to achieve their objectives. Seduced by their nobility and the generous inspiration which they make a show of, Central African countries overlook the distortions they induce in forestry administration decisions. In fact there are many good souls who claim to be defending the forests of the Congo Basin, but at the end of the day, what they are doing, in erudite language, is to orchestrate African people, promote corruption and cronyism or support dishonest politicians. For example an African official in an international NGO who fabricated a false mission report was "catapulted" to the post of auditor of this organization. Another African, this time a competent one, found that if he wanted to obtain a subregional post it was under the condition he aligned himself with the position of a Minister who, if our sources are true, was not exactly a referent in matters of good political and economic governance.

Conclusions

First of all, it would be advisable to strengthen the capacity of the African people to define for themselves the functions of their forestry administrations. Secondly, it should be made clear that the fact of reflecting on these administrations, analyzing the factors that affect them, including diplomacy, is not an intellectual or diplomatic heresy. Furthermore, this approach is not entirely new, it is a prolongation of the efforts made for decades now by numerous authors, mainly in the field of

international relations sociology and it provides social visibility to factors that are frequently ignored but which explain to a great extent the reasons for the ineffectiveness of so many measures adopted at conferences, seminars and workshops.

This is a timely approach, considering that Central African forestry administrations are much more open than they were in 1960. In this context, the inclusion of African people's concerns in the functions of forestry administrations will be favoured, not because of the discretion of the actors but because of the support of public opinion and of companies. This implies that the rationalization of decision-making processes requires, at the forefront, public training on the sociology of these administrations and on international relations.

Furthermore, when actors in the so-called sustainable development only manage to provoke the rejection of the honest people they are attempting to help, it is hard to affirm that they are aiming, as their mission would suppose, at promoting an improvement in the living conditions in Central Africa. In this case, unless the international community makes an effort to remove them from African forests, it will be participating in poor forest governance and contributing to unsustainable development.

Finally, those who examine the function of the administrations studied in this analysis will agree that it is necessary to build national, subregional and regional markets for quality forest products. Such action will doubtlessly be insufficient to achieve that the forestry administrations arrange themselves in function of the needs and aspirations to welfare of the inhabitants of Central Africa. However these are important advances that should be strengthened in the future thanks to a better organization of the beneficiaries, to rational experience and, above all, to the justified support of public opinion.

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