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## Nothing much at the Central African forestry ministerial conference held in Cameroon

The first conference of Central African forestry ministers took place in Yaoundé from 4-7 December, within the framework of the follow-up of the implementation of the decisions of the Heads of States Summit held in Yaoundé in March 1999. The ministerial meeting had been preceded in September by a meeting of experts from the forestry departments of the Central African countries. The aims of the organizers of the event --as could be perceived clearly from the agenda-- were the following:

- The adoption of a sub-regional action plan for the sustainable management of forests. The plan --described as a convergence plan-- aimed at defining realistic objectives for the sub-region, also indicating national activities to be carried out by each State aimed at moving towards the objective. The need for convergence is explained by the differences in the levels of forestry development in the different countries of the region.
- The adoption of a monitoring mechanism to coordinate the implementation of the convergence plan. The option for a flexible and agile executive secretariat (composed by one or two persons) was put forward, particularly for budgetary reasons. The organizational structure included the following authorities: the heads of states summit, the ministerial conference (every two years), the executive secretariat, a consultative sub-regional expert forum with participation of the forestry experts of the sub-region, role currently played by CEFDHAC (Conference on Central African Moist-Forest Ecosystems), and national fora.
- The adoption of a funding mechanism for the convergence plan. The main issue was that of finding a long-lasting funding mechanism, in order to reduce dependence in relation with funders. There was a proposal for the creation of a fiduciary fund.
- The signing of the Yaoundé Declaration by the Democratic Republic of Congo, which expressed its wish to join the process.
- The decision on the place where the next ministerial meeting would take place, which would be the starting point for a feeling of ownership of the process by the other countries of the sub-region (until now, all meetings have been held in Cameroon).

The meeting was a failure for the following reasons:

1. From the participation point of view. Seven delegations were expected, headed by their ministers. Six delegations were present and actually only three headed by their ministers (Cameroon, Congo, and Central African Republic). The Central African Republic minister could only attend thanks to a special plane sent by WWF. The ministers from Chad and Gabon sent their excuses at the last minute without explaining their reasons. Some sources expressed that the Gabonese minister had been dissuaded to participate by his staff (which had preceded him to the meeting) to come to Yaoundé. The minister of the Democratic Republic of Congo could not attend the meeting because he had been appointed to office only two weeks before the meeting. It is quite clear that the Central

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African States lack the political will to make this process move forward and to truly work for the promotion of the sustainable management of forests.

2. From a substance point of view. The main documents were not adopted. The convergence plan was not really discussed. The main actions to be implemented at the national level were identified. Additionally, the ministers could not reach an agreement either on the monitoring or on the funding mechanisms. In relation with the funding mechanisms, the ministers ordered a supplementary study in order to be able to better understand the way in which the fiduciary fund would work.

3. The adjournment until March. The ministers decided to meet again in March 2001 to analyse the issues not agreed upon during this meeting, which will delay the process in at least three months.

Finally, it is important to highlight that while the "convergence plan" may have some positive aspects, it almost totally ignores the role and rights of local populations, as well as the role of civil society in general in relation with the management of forests. Such attitude, linked to the fact that the central issue of governance in the forestry sector is not included in the plan's objectives and coupled with the obvious lack of the governments' political will, provides little hope for sustainable forest management in the region.

Article based on summary report on the meeting produced by Samuel Nguiffo,