

REGIONAL OVERVIEW

Forest Certification in Sub-Saharan Africa

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INTRODUCTION

This section presents case studies examining the emergence of forest certification in four Sub-Saharan African countries: Gabon, South Africa, Uganda, and Zambia. As with other developing countries reviewed in this book, forest certification has yet to achieve widespread support among forest owners (Directorate General of International Cooperation and Development Helsinki 2002). However in its impact in the areas that have undergone certification, and as a new inclusive arena in which to deliberate over the ideas and principles governing sustainable forest management, it has been undoubtedly important.

Most members of the forest policy communities in the countries covered in this section have been actively involved in discussions about forest certification and its potential role in addressing ongoing environmental and social concerns in Africa's forests. Hence, the cases to follow reveal the important role of forest certification as a "carrier" of ideas. Whether certification will ultimately be the preferred instrument with which to implement wider acceptance of what is considered appropriate forest management, or whether it will eventually fade away in favor of governmental and intergovernmental agreements, remains to be seen. To date, two certificate systems, the Forest Stewardship Council (FSC) and the Keurhout system of the Netherlands (now defunct) have played the major role in certifying forest operations in Africa, but by 2005, the Program for the Endorsement of Forest Certification had made plans for significant inroads on this continent.

These four case study countries share an early start in forest certification relative to other countries in this region as well as some economic, political and social aspects. However, together they offer an impressive range of features to study, as each country has drawn on different social players, economic drivers, and focal points as certification has emerged. Before delving into these case studies, we review below the overarching similarities and distinctions among these countries as well as the critical questions facing the region as a whole. Other Sub-Saharan African countries that have experienced forest certification but are not included as case studies include Cameroon, Namibia, Zimbabwe, Ghana, the Democratic Republic of Congo, among others.

SIMILARITIES

Poverty and Disease

Most countries in Sub-Saharan Africa draw international concern for their many conservation and humanitarian difficulties – from deforestation and rapid biodiversity loss to poverty, disease, and civil conflict. Our four case-study countries are no exception. Poverty and disease exist at high levels in all four countries, making these issues a focus of national and international players alike. For example, 73 percent of Zambia's population lives below the poverty line, and over one in five of its adults is infected with HIV/AIDS. At birth, individuals in Zambia have an average

life expectancy of just 35 years (Central Intelligence Agency 2005). Even the population of South Africa, with its more developed infrastructure and diversified economy, has an average life expectancy of just 44 years, a one in five occurrence of HIV, and a 50 percent occurrence of living below the poverty line (Central Intelligence Agency 2005).

Beyond the individual level, these countries have very limited infrastructure, technological capacity, and economic development, although South Africa stands apart from the group with substantially more development. Waterways and roads are underdeveloped and many people go without access to safe drinking water, health care, and other critical services on a daily basis. Access to technology is limited; in Uganda, for example, there were just 1.3 radios per 100 people in 2002 and just six percent of the population accessed the Internet in 2001 (International Telecommunication Union 2005). The economies depend largely on a small number of extractive industries, such as crude oil in Gabon and copper in Zambia. Forestry is generally an important, but not the dominant, source of revenue for the country (in Gabon, timber only contributes 4 percent to GDP, but the timber industry provides the most jobs of any private industry in Gabon, is second in exports, and growing every day, while the contribution of timber to Zambia's economy is less than one percent).

These factors have affected the emergence of forest certification both in shaping the broader priorities for the country and day-to-day operations. From an operations perspective, the high prevalence of HIV/AIDS, for example, is described in the South Africa case as posing one of the greatest risks to the stability of forestry, with infection rates among forestry workers as high as 39 percent in some areas. A high prevalence of HIV and other diseases across the region (with the exception of Uganda, where it is steadily declining) affects forest certification as forest workers are disabled physically, worker morale plummets, technical expertise is lost as workers die, rates of absenteeism increase, and companies must bear the increased costs of health care expenses.

In addition, forest certification requires a certain level of financial and technical resources that most of these countries are still struggling to develop (with the partial exception of South Africa). As the Gabon case highlights, it is difficult to find the resources to monitor and enforce logging activities, recruit high-quality staff with technical expertise, and obtain equipment in such a context. The Zambia case explains that costly requirements of forest certification — such as the assessment and monitoring of forest operations — are even more expensive when operations must go beyond its borders to find trained experts. This context of poverty is perpetuated as an initial lack of resources results in the absence of necessary preconditions for long-term investment by the private sector.

This context further shapes why and how forest certification has been advanced. The range of players involved in promoting forest certification — from international financing organizations (such as GTZ) to environmental NGOs (World Wildlife Fund-Belgium in Gabon), to local NGOs (Uganda and Zambia), and the timber industry itself (South Africa) — may be focused on forest certification's capacity to

alleviate poverty, enhance rural development, or contribute to local and national economies by securing or initiating access to international markets. A focus on longer-term environment-based goals such as protecting biological diversity and sustainable forest management may not be the leading priority, as there is little room for conservation for its own sake within this context of human suffering and immediate need.

A past of colonialism and oppressive relationships with other countries is another similarity, and one that has particular relevance to the advancement of forest certification. As the Gabon case highlights, for instance, countries may be reluctant to accept certification projects that originate from external sources when there are real or perceived threats to national sovereignty, and where there are concerns that the local context has not been taken into account. The uncertain duration of external projects can also cause hesitation. Initial feelings may subside, however, as the process of forest certification may be seen as having more transparency and involving a greater number of stakeholders than traditional government.

Yet another similarity among all four case study countries is a noted shift over the past 10-15 years toward privatizing some aspects of forestry and becoming more involved in international markets (Uganda's closing of timber exports in 1994 notwithstanding).

In most African countries there is a perception that a transition to either private management or more formalized communal ownership may improve the way forests are managed. Land under customary tenure, which is accessed by multiple people and no particular person or organization claims long-term responsibility, features the highest rate of land degradation according to the Uganda case, where over 70 percent of its forested land exists on private or customary lands. In response to these tendencies, Uganda's Land Act of 1998 allowed for more formalized communal ownership, which may improve sustainable management of the land.

Similarly, in Gabon and Zambia, where forests are all government-owned, there has been a recent switch toward private and community management of those state resources. A similar path was taken in Zambia in 1998; however, these reforms have had difficulty being implemented. Indeed, forest certification emerged in Zambia at the same time that their socialist economy changed to a more market-based approach, making it difficult to analyze the impacts of forest certification independent of these broader trends. Similarly, South Africa's emergence into world markets in 1994, following its abandonment of apartheid and the implementation of democratic elections, paved the way for certification, as a market-force, to play a role in this country's forestry initiatives.

In addition to changing economic policies, in recent years, governments have developed more comprehensive environmental forest initiatives. In the Gabon case, for example, the government has taken significant measures since 1992 to improve forest policy, including requiring forest management plans, increased emphasis on social aspects of forest management, developing technical standards and creating a forestry fund. In these cases it is difficult, if not impossible, to untangle the independent effects of the ideas championed and development through forest

certification dialogues from the effects of changing government policies. It is likely that these multiple forces — certification and progressive forestry policies, for example — are working in tandem, reinforcing each other. In some cases involving privatized plantations in South Africa, for example, government demanded that forests be certified by new owners within 24 months after privatization to ensure third party verification of sustainable management practices.

DIFFERENCES

Although our case study countries share many social and economic similarities, they are quite distinctive in terms of geography, size, and ecology. They represent a range of regions, with Zambia and South Africa in the South, Gabon in the western part of the Congo Basin, and Uganda to the East. They also range in size substantially, from Uganda and Gabon both under 300,000 square kilometers, to South Africa of over one million square kilometers. Gabon has the smallest human population with just over one million, while South Africa has over forty million (Central Intelligence Agency 2005).

Beyond demography, the countries show wide variation in their levels of forest cover, ecosystem types, and environmental problems. These differences and others are responsible for the diverse ways in which forest certification is manifested in our case study countries, ranging from giving an environmental stamp of approval to South Africa's exotic mono-crop plantations to certifying Uganda's protected areas for the purposes of carbon sequestration.

Gabon is distinguished by extremely rich biodiversity, with more than 80 percent forest cover consisting largely of high conservation value tropical rainforest. The forests of Gabon, combined with those of other countries in the Congo Basin, make up the second largest block of tropical forest in the world, home to some of the world's most treasured species including great apes and elephants. Unlike the other case study countries, deforestation (or the conversion of forest to other land types such as agriculture) is *not* a major threat in Gabon; however, related environmental problems associated with logging and other extractive industries, such as over-hunting for bushmeat (wild meat for food), jeopardize healthy populations of chimpanzees, gorillas, and other highly vulnerable species. Unlike some of the other case study countries, Gabon does not include plantations in its array of land use types or forest certification areas.

Uganda, in contrast, faces high levels of deforestation as agricultural land encroaches on what is, in many cases, *protected* forest area. Forests cover 24 percent of Uganda's land area, with the majority comprised of savannah woodlands and tropical high forests, and just one percent in plantations. In this context, forest certification can be used as a tool in areas that are already protected, but that have been degraded nonetheless by poaching, agricultural expansion, and overharvesting. Here, the emergence of forest certification for use of carbon sequestration rather than for timber could result in certification being used for promoting eco-tourism — as the same forests are home to large populations of chimpanzees and gorillas.

In Zambia 55 percent of forest cover consists of closed forests and savannah woodlands, which are under threat from deforestation associated with clearing for agriculture, settlements, and wood fuel harvesting. Other key environmental problems include soil erosion, water degradation and the loss of biodiversity. In addition to some forest products, these habitats provide Non-Timber Forest Products (NTFPs) such as mushrooms and honey, hence forest certification in Zambia has focused on these products in addition to timber.

South Africa is also distinct, with just seven percent forest cover (68 percent tropical and 32 percent subtropical) and just over one percent under commercial forestry operations, almost all of which consists of exotic mono-crop operations. Approximately 80 percent of South Africa's plantations are certified, but this is a contentious issue since these plantations were placed in non-forested natural ecosystems. The country grapples with modest deforestation rates as well as other environmental problems such as water shortages, aggravated by forestry operations in catchment areas.

Role of External Markets

In addition to very different natural contexts and types of certification, these countries have unique combinations with respect to the influence of domestic versus international players and pressure from international markets (though at present none of these countries have substantial internal markets for certified timber and external market demand tends to affect market access rather than a price premium).

As the case studies highlight, the pull of international markets in the evolution toward forest certification is a dominant motivator in South Africa, Gabon, and Zambia, but not Uganda. In South Africa, a net exporter of timber, the emergence of forest certification was driven solely by the timber industry, which felt it could secure better environmentally sensitive consumer bases in the UK, the United States and Germany via certification. Gabon and Zambia share this emphasis on international markets but also had a significant investment from international donors. In Zambia, for example, donors that were involved in community development and poverty alleviation saw the potential of certification to develop export markets and hence provide an ongoing source of revenue for communities.

In contrast, Uganda has recently faced timber shortages and has not traditionally exported timber to international markets that require certification for access, such as European markets. Rather, Uganda has relied on exports to other African countries, such as Rwanda. Like all the African case study countries, there is no internal market for certified products. However, Uganda has seen much external investment in certification by non-profits such as the FACE Foundation (Forest Absorbing Carbon Dioxide Emissions) as a way to create and certify stable stores of carbon for a potential international market.

IMPORTANT QUESTIONS FACING THE REGION

The use of forest certification to provide environmental, economic and social benefits to local communities in Sub-Saharan Africa is still just emerging and many questions remain. Perhaps the most salient question is how and whether forest certification's objectives can be more directly linked with poverty alleviation and rural development and whether it must do so in order to survive in this context given this emphasis by many local, national, and international players alike. Where would this focus leave environmental protection and sustainable forestry priorities?

Forestry operations can and often do contribute to local development in a number of ways, such as developing an infrastructure of logging roads or building schools and health centers for the workers and their families. Some logging companies contribute to local development projects by developing a clean water supply, building community centers, or granting small amounts of money to community members as compensation for using their local resources. In the case where local companies are involved, forest operations directly contribute to the economic prosperity of an area through local employment.

Should forest certification focus on developing these links? The integration of conservation and development objectives is hardly new, as aiming to protect the environment without incorporating the priorities of local human communities into the process has been seen as not only unethical, but also ineffective. Integrated Conservation and Development Programs (ICDPs) and community-based conservation programs emerged in order to address both of these concerns in unison; instead of pitting environmental protection against development, the sustainable use of natural resources could provide ongoing benefits to local communities, who would be encouraged to protect the resources for the economic benefits they received from them (for example, a community might engage with certified forest operations because their community benefits would be higher). However, there is still some debate over whether these approaches are generally effective, particularly in protecting the environment.

Another key question for Africa is whether forest certification can go beyond just timber to include Non Timber Forest Products – such as honey and mushrooms – or carbon sequestration or even ecotourism. Both the Ugandan and Zambian case studies demonstrate that many of Africa's forests may be more suitable for ecotourism or carbon sequestration than for timber, and whether international certification schemes like FSC decide to incorporate these other forest uses may be essential to whether certification is used in this region.

Finally, more research needs to be undertaken to assess whether forest certification in the African context might move from an arena of policy learning about appropriate sustainable forestry practices to influencing “on the ground” management. That is, in an area of the world where governments often lack significant resources to force compliance, could forest certification provide the resources and means to accomplish such a crucial task? In this sense, are there potential synergies between forest certification and governmental initiatives?

With forest certification still in an emergent phase, the cases to follow cannot answer these questions, but they do shed light on where to direct the next phase of research, and on what practical efforts are required to address the deterioration of Africa's forests.

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