

Forging new partnerships in Cameroon

When funding for Cameroon's adaptive collaborative management (ACM) project came to an end in 2003, CIFOR researchers were determined to continue working in a similar, participatory vein on forest management issues. 'We came across the concept of model forests,' explains Chimère Diaw, CIFOR's programme coordinator for forest governance in central Africa, 'and the more we looked at it, the more attractive it seemed.'

It is easy to see why the concept chimed with Diaw and his colleagues. Partnerships are at the heart of ACM. They are also central to the success of model forests. The model forest approach was originally designed in Canada, and since it was brought to the world's attention at the 1992 Earth Summit, some 40 model forests have been established under the umbrella of the International Model Forest Network Secretariat (IMFNS). 'Model forests are about creating voluntary partnerships to help plan and manage large-scale, multi-functional landscapes,' explains Diaw. 'They are not about setting aside beautiful bits of forest for conservation.'

In 2003, CIFOR and IMFNS arranged a series of workshops in Cameroon and Canada. A range of organisations, including IMFNS, the Commission des forêts d'Afrique Centrale (COMIFAC), the Cameroon Ministry of Forestry, the Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA), the UN Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO) and the World Conservation Union (IUCN), agreed to work together to plan for the development of model forests in the Congo Basin. Meetings were chaired by Cameroon's Ministry of Forestry with CIFOR acting as facilitator.

It was agreed that a competition would be developed to choose a model forest in Cameroon that could serve as a pilot site for the Congo Basin. Ten sites were invited to a workshop discussing how the pilot sites should be selected. Field visits were made to the three which produced the most impressive dossiers.

A change of government at the end of 2004 delayed the process of choosing a site, but CIFOR and its partners pressed ahead by holding meetings and workshops in potential pilot sites in Campo Ma'an, in the south west, and in Dja and Mpomo, in the east. In June 2005, CIFOR's Assistant Director General, Yemi Katerere, visited the Prime Minister of Cameroon, Inoni Ephraim, who expressed his support for the model forest approach. In August, the government decided to choose both sites, rather than just one, and the Minister of Forests officially requested that the IMFNS accept Cameroon as a full member of the network.

There has been widespread enthusiasm for this new approach to land management, and meetings have attracted every possible interest group, from logging companies to the managers of protected areas; from local NGOs and organisations representing Bantu and pygmy communities to national politicians.

'This is not the first time in Cameroon that all the different stakeholders involved in forest and land management have agreed to plan and act in a collaborative way,' reflects Chimère Diaw, 'but this is the first time it's happened on such a scale. People are still pursuing their own goals, but they respect the views of those who have a different perspective.' There is now widespread acceptance that collaboration lies at the heart of good management. As Vincent Ovono, a Bagyeli pygmy who spoke at one of the meetings, put it: 'Protecting the forests is something we have to do together.'

'The uptake of the model forest concept at both sites, and at the national level, has been very strong,' says Peter Besseau, Executive Director of IMFNS. 'Our partnership with CIFOR as a lead facilitator in Cameroon has turned out to be a really effective pairing of skills, mandates and creative energy, and I see these two model forests as a dynamic way to anchor a process that is highly relevant to resource management issues in Cameroon and the Congo Basin.'



The Prime Minister of Cameroon, Inoni Ephraim, greets CIFOR's Assistant Director General, Yemi Katerere. Cameroon has been highly supportive of the model forests initiative. (Photo by Patrick Nyemeck)