

Creating a pool of experience

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Elke Verbeeten,
Dutch JPO

“Although some Junior Professional Officers (JPOs) will find things to complain about, I think all – or nearly all – would accept the offer of a post with CIFOR again without hesitation,” says Elke Verbeeten. “I have gained valuable work experience and this has undoubtedly improved my CV.” Talk to the other Dutch-funded JPOs – or associate experts – who have worked for CIFOR, and they will say much the same, even if their individual experiences have varied greatly.

Since 1954, the Associate Expert Programme of the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MoFA) has provided learning and work experience for over 3,500 young graduates in international development cooperation. Over 40 different international organisations have hosted the associate experts, and CIFOR is one of four centres belonging to the Consultative Group on International Agricultural Research (CGIAR) to benefit in recent years. A major independent review of the programme, commissioned by MoFA in 2006, confirmed that it has had a considerable impact. Over four out of five graduates have gone on to pursue long-term careers in development cooperation.

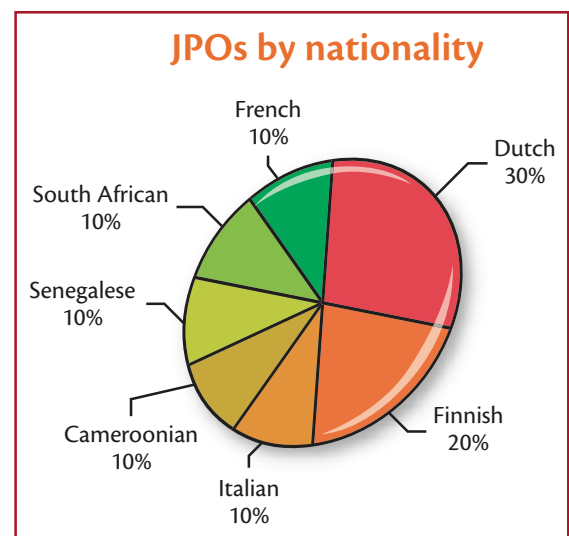
In 2007, two of CIFOR’s Dutch-funded JPOs worked with the Governance programme, two with Environmental Services, three with Livelihoods and one with Communications. Their research mirrored CIFOR’s broad range of interests. The JPOs in Africa, for example, were researching topics ranging from forest-based conflict in Cameroon to the hydrology of semi-arid environments in Burkina Faso; from the importance of forests for livelihoods in Zambia’s copper belt to modelling landscape dynamics in the Congo Basin.

The Dutch-funded JPOs, and smaller numbers funded by the Italian and Finnish governments, begin their three-year assignments by spending two months at CIFOR’s headquarters in Bogor. “Even though I wasn’t going to work in Indonesia, this was a very useful introduction to CIFOR,”

explains Verbeeten. “It enabled me to meet many scientists and to understand how the organisation works.” After a short stint in Bogor, the JPOs then head for the field.

Most postings involve far more than straightforward research, as Ruben de Koning discovered when he began exploring the links between forests and conflict on the border between Cameroon and Nigeria. “One moment I found myself lost in the mangroves, with only the chief’s blessings and a poorly functioning GPS to help me get back the village,” recalls De Koning. “Then just one week later, I was in Brussels, discussing global policy responses to forest conflicts.” Like many JPOs, he has had to interact with a wide range of different people and organisations, from local villagers to international decision-makers.

The independent evaluation conducted for MoFA found that many past associate experts rated the quality of supervision lower than various other aspects of the programme. The truth is that some have received better supervision than others. Marieke Sandker is among those with a positive





Ruben de Koning says that he has benefited greatly from his experiences as a JPO with CIFOR, studying forests and conflict in Cameroon. Likewise, Marieke Sandker has appreciated the mentoring she has received from CIFOR scientists, and the organisation's non-hierarchical structure. (CIFOR)

story to tell. "From the outset, I knew exactly what I was expected to do, and the supervision has been very thorough," says Sandker, who has been working on landscape modelling. Like De Koning, she appreciates the fact that she has had to interact with decision-makers and think about the impact of her research. "I have found CIFOR non-hierarchical, and very open compared to a university research department," she says.

Many JPOs have found their work with CIFOR very challenging. Take, for example, Madeleen Husselman, who began researching the markets for honey producers in Zambia in 2007. "This been a very good learning experience for me, not least because I have taken on far more responsibilities than I expected," she says. "Besides the research, I have had to find and hire partners to work with and help manage CIFOR's small office in Lusaka." At times, she has found her workload excessively heavy and her administrative duties daunting, but she is enjoying the research.

But have the JPOs done as much for CIFOR as CIFOR has done for them? "I think this has been a fantastic programme," says Bruce Campbell, director of CIFOR's Livelihoods programme. "Providing the JPOs receive adequate supervision, they tend to be extremely productive. They also produce a large amount of data and work on several papers, and this undoubtedly benefits CIFOR."

One of the advantages of the Dutch-funded programme is that CIFOR can hire developing world scientists, and this helps to build research capacity in countries that really need it. It also benefits CIFOR. Take, for example, Manyewu Mutamba, who completed his study of household livelihoods in Zambia in October 2007. According to Campbell, his data is groundbreaking in that it illustrates the savanna communities' exceptionally high dependence on forests. Besides his research in Zambia, Mutamba also had some global responsibilities, and he assisted Research Associate Arild Angelsen with CIFOR's Poverty and Environment Network.

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