

# A case study on inclusiveness in forest management decision-making mechanisms: a comparison of certified and non-certified forests in the Republic of the Congo

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## SUMMARY

In recent years inclusiveness has been promoted as an integral element of forest management and certification. Under Forest Stewardship Council certification, consultations and engagement with local communities are required in planning operations. Yet little research has been done to examine how local men and women participate in decision making in the context of forest certification. This case study aims to examine and compare inclusiveness in a certified and a non-certified forest management unit in the Republic of the Congo. Focus group discussions and individual interviews indicate that male participation is significant in both units. However, female participation is more active in the villages of the non-certified unit, where some of the women have achieved strategic positions. They display a greater level of self-mobilization and active participation, which can be linked to self-started initiatives. These findings may have important implications for voluntary certification bodies in encouraging women's participation.

Keywords: inclusiveness, gender dynamics, decision-making mechanisms, Congo, forest certification

## Etude de cas sur l'inclusion dans les mécanismes de prise de décision liés à la gestion forestière: comparaison de forêts certifiées et non certifiées en République du Congo

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Au cours des dernières années, l'inclusion a été encouragée comme un élément intégral de la gestion et de la certification des forêts. Sous la certification FSC (Forest Stewardship Council), les communautés locales doivent être consultées et engagées lors de la planification des opérations. Néanmoins peu de recherches ont été faites pour examiner comment les hommes et les femmes locaux participent à la prise de décision dans le contexte de la certification forestière. Cette étude de cas vise à examiner et à comparer le niveau d'inclusion dans une unité de gestion forestière certifiée et non certifiée en République du Congo. Les groupes de discussion et les entrevues individuelles indiquent que la participation masculine est importante dans les deux unités. Toutefois, la participation des femmes est plus active dans les villages de l'unité non certifiée, où certaines femmes ont atteint des positions stratégiques. Elles affichent un niveau élevé d'auto-mobilisation et de participation active pouvant être lié à des initiatives auto-initiées. Ces résultats peuvent avoir des implications importantes pour les organismes de certification volontaires afin d'encourager la participation des femmes.

## Un estudio de caso sobre la inclusión en los mecanismos de toma de decisiones para la gestión forestal: comparación entre bosques certificados y no certificados en la República del Congo

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En los últimos años se ha promovido la inclusión como un elemento integral de la gestión y la certificación forestal. Bajo la certificación del *Forest Stewardship Council*, se requiere consultar y entablar un diálogo con las comunidades locales para planificar las operaciones. Sin embargo, se ha hecho poca investigación para explorar cómo participan los hombres y las mujeres locales en la toma de decisiones en el contexto de la certificación forestal. Este estudio de caso tiene como objetivo analizar y comparar la inclusión en una unidad de manejo forestal certificada y no certificada en la República del Congo. Las discusiones de grupos focales y entrevistas individuales indicaron una participación masculina significativa en ambas unidades. Sin embargo, la participación femenina es más activa en las aldeas de la unidad no certificada, en la que varias mujeres han alcanzado posiciones estratégicas. Éstas muestran un mayor nivel de movilización y de participación activa, que puede vincularse a iniciativas emprendidas por ellas mismas. Estos hallazgos podrían tener importantes implicaciones para los organismos de certificación voluntarios en cuanto al fomento de la participación de las mujeres.

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## INTRODUCTION

The Forest Stewardship Council (FSC) certification programme was launched in 1993 by nongovernmental conservation organizations. Its goals are to promote the responsible management of the world's forests and to achieve an “environmentally appropriate, socially beneficial and economically viable use of natural resources and provision of ecosystem services” in logging concessions (FSC 2012a: 1). Besides delivering certificates upon compliance with standards, the FSC promotes a holistic approach to sustainable forest management (SFM) embracing social, environmental and economic values. FSC certification can also provide a key tool for achieving part of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), based on legal and customary rights and the engagement of all interested parties to support sustainable natural resource management and the attainment of social and economic objectives (FSC 2016).

Forest management certification schemes, such as that offered by the FSC, are seen as an instrument to support equitable SFM, with the underlying goals of promoting fair distribution of powers and benefits, as well as harnessing the public and private sectors and civil society (Jones 2003, Meidinger *et al.* 2003, Molnar 2003, Thornber 2002). SFM is about making sure that “a broad range of experiences, lessons, interests and values are included in these processes, given the heterogeneity of the forest population, particularly in terms of differences, powers, dependency, and cross-cutting variables such as gender and ethnicity” (Varghese and Reed 2012: 1). Therefore, to reap the full rewards of forest certification, it is essential to have an integrated participatory process that is representative and inclusive (Meidinger 2011, Tsanga *et al.* 2014, Varghese and Reed 2012). This raises questions of how to ensure that forest certification offers a large range of user groups a space to voice their concerns and needs in respect of the management of forest resources.

The FSC certification programme has a strong social element that seeks to improve labour conditions, enhance equitable community relations, alleviate poverty, advance livelihoods and tenure rights of local populations, and contribute to local development in industrial logging concession areas (Cerutti *et al.* 2014, Molnar 2003, Tsanga *et al.* 2014). In its social policy programme (FSC 2012b) the FSC has elemental links to gender relations although these are not

explicitly recognised. It is implied through the varying requirements with which certified organizations have to comply with, including: all International Labour Organization (ILO) conventions; binding international agreements to which the country is a signatory;<sup>1</sup> applicable national laws; the free, prior and informed consent (FPIC)<sup>2</sup> principle – FPIC being a certification requirement; the high conservation value (HCV) forest concept;<sup>3</sup> workers' and indigenous peoples' rights; land tenure and use rights; equitable benefit-sharing; and inclusive decision-making mechanisms. The inclusiveness requirement is directly reflected in the *FSC FPIC Guidelines* (FSC 2012c) and in Global Criterion 4.4 of the *FSC Principles and Criteria for Forest Stewardship* (P&C), which requires that “consultations shall be maintained with people and groups (both men and women) directly affected by management operations” (FSC 2002: 5). The *FSC Forest Stewardship Standard for the Congo Basin Region*, including the Republic of the Congo, requires logging companies to “regularly and continuously consult the individuals and groups (both men and women)” as well as “measures to minimise the social impact (including gender-related matters)”. Management plans and operations shall incorporate the results of evaluations of social impact. (FSC 2012d: 40)

In 2015 the FSC recognized and introduced the concept of gender equality in the new version of the Global P&C (FSC 2015: 11–23).<sup>4</sup> The concept will also be integrated in the second version of the FPIC implementation guide, with the more explicit requirement of recognizing and addressing the right to FPIC for local communities and indigenous peoples.

This raises important questions as to how to ensure that the FSC offers a space for women and other marginalized people to voice their concerns through active and interactive participation as defined by Agarwal (2001)<sup>5</sup>. This study identifies important implications for future approaches and development of standards for certification organizations, as well as the forestry sector, in encouraging women's participation. It may also provide useful information on factors that influence women's participation, particularly in the context of implementing the new P&C and the FPIC guidelines. Important lessons can be learned for future forest certification strategies and approaches, which will have to be based on broader social knowledge and empirical data, as well as reinforced endogenous value systems and development channels.

<sup>1</sup> The Republic of the Congo is a signatory to the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) and the International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination (ICERD).

<sup>2</sup> A legal condition whereby a person or community can be said to have given consent to an action prior to its commencement, based upon a clear appreciation and understanding of the facts, implications and future consequences of that action, and the possession of all relevant facts at the time when consent is given. Free, prior and informed consent includes the right to grant, modify, withhold or withdraw approval (FSC 2015).

<sup>3</sup> Forest areas of outstanding biological, ecological, social and cultural importance – a holistic approach that recognizes the needs and rights of many otherwise marginalized peoples (FSC 2012b).

<sup>4</sup> At the time of the study, this version was not used for audit and therefore was not implemented by the logging companies in the Republic of the Congo. Thus, the gender component was not an explicit requirement for certification.

<sup>5</sup> Agarwal defines active participation as “expressing opinions, whether or not solicited, or taking initiatives of other sorts”, and interactive (empowering) participation as “having voice and influence in the group's decision”.

## Theoretical underpinnings

Academics have extensively investigated the characteristics of participation in SFM, particularly the participation of women. Agarwal (1997, 2001, 2009a, 2009b, 2010) identified several characteristics and determinants of women's participation in forest management, but also exclusionary patterns and the effects on forest management outcomes and poverty of women's presence in committees. Other authors have built on Agarwal's work across different regions, calling for increased women's participation. Coleman and Mwangi (2013) analysed the determinants of women's participation in forestry institutions and the effects that women's participation has on institutional and forest management outcomes in Bolivia, Kenya, Mexico and Uganda. The authors suggested that the gender composition of forest committees and the sociocultural backgrounds (literacy, education, practical skills, employment, social status and self-confidence) of women significantly affected their attendance at meetings and the probability that they would voice their opinions.

Varghese and Reed (2012) also argued that women's effective participation is constrained by several factors including rules of entry, divisions of labour, social norms and perceptions and rules of practice, personal endowments and attributes, and organizational cultures. Thus, for effective participation we must consider how power and influence relations operate within SFM processes and how they affect the capacity of individuals to organize themselves into groups.

Whilst, there is limited research on the gender aspects of forest certification, Lewark *et al.* (2011) examined the impact of certification related to forests and non-timber forest products (NTFPs) on women's participation in two forest user groups in Nepal. The authors found that men are more aware of forest certification because they have informal spaces of discussion to mingle freely and communicate more. In turn, they can access and disseminate information faster. The authors called for long-term capacity building efforts focusing on gender equality, and further research on the linkages between certification requirements and the impact of these requirements on the forest user groups.

Research has also shown that inclusiveness requires knowing who exactly the forest stakeholders are and what relations they have with forests and resources. It also requires considering how women and other marginalized groups may be excluded from SFM and addressing those constraints that limit effective participation (Varghese and Reed 2012). Within forest communities, these dynamics vary according to age, social class, race, occupation, sometimes caste and gender (Agrawal 2003, Akerkar 2001, Gupte 2004, Mai *et al.* 2011, Manfre and Rubin 2012, Suna *et al.* 2011).

In this regard, gender is considered a critical variable for analysing and influencing access, use and distribution of benefits from NTFPs. Firstly, men and women have different experiences, needs, interests, strengths, opportunities, limitations, impacts and biases. These aspects must be reflected in the way communities are approached and explored. Secondly, gender has practical and policy-oriented implications. Mai

*et al.* (2011) stress that, if men and women are not homogeneous groups, in order to alleviate the constraints women face, then appropriate specific policies that are socially integrated and inclusive should be designed to increase the likelihood of targeting them and achieving meaningful change. If not, there is a genuine risk of overlooking diversity and entrenching inequality and exclusion. Finally, gender provides a practical and methodological approach to analysing opportunities and forms of marginalization by providing a conceptual framework to examine roles, relations and power patterns. In that sense, gender is a key analytical and explanatory variable in the way we manage forests and resources in general that can help us understand participation and measure the level of good governance (Colfer 2013).

## Gaps in research

When entering the certification process, forest communities expect that it will leverage donor commitment and government financial and technical support, as well as help them access new markets and get a premium price for their products (Molnar 2003). The potential risk is that external actors, such as certification bodies can in turn create a situation of dependency, limiting self-development paths and undermining communities' capacities to collaboratively self-solve problems (Bass *et al.* 2001, Molnar 2003). Molnar (2003) also pointed at the risk of imposing external management models on communities, overlooking internal social and institutional differences and leading to a simplified concept of what the community is and what needs to be changed.

However, there is limited research on how forest certification can foster balanced participation of men and women in the collaborative process of managing forests sustainably without undermining endogenous values, internal problem-solving and self-development paths. Furthermore, research studies on forest certification and gender have not focused on identifying and maximizing self-started and externally driven decision-making processes to enable the full participation of women. Siripurapu and Geores (2016) argued that earlier studies had mentioned discussion spaces, supporting structures and processes to foster women's involvement in decision making in participatory natural resource management programmes. But these studies failed to identify the spaces and structures operating at the grassroots. Consequently, there is a risk of overlooking unique knowledge, skills, collaborative arrangements and community social dynamics.

## Research objectives and questions

In light of this, understanding how inclusiveness operates within decision-making processes, addressing endogenous and exogenous experiences, is a key element of this case study. It compares the decision-making mechanisms in an FSC-certified and a non-certified forest management unit (UFA) and draws on Agarwal's participation framework (2001), conceptualizing the characteristics of women's participation. This research seeks to address the following questions:

- 1) What are the differences in the decision-making processes between an FSC-certified and a non-certified UFA?
- 2) Does men's and women's participation differ in decision making in these units?
- 3) How are the barriers to women's participation perceived?

## METHODS

### Study sites

The study focused on four villages, within the two distinct UFAs of Pokola and Tala-Tala, in Sangha department, in the north of the Republic of the Congo. The regional capital Ouésso is a major platform for the timber trade and other local businesses. The study sites were selected according to several criteria including: forest management type; ethnicity; village size, location and road access; and the author's time, budgetary and logistical constraints. All four villages are deeply socially stratified with two major ethnic groups: the Bantus, who are mainly sedentary farmers, and the Baka, who are traditionally hunter-gatherers. The Baka live in seminomadic tribes and are dominated by the Bantus, as described by Lewis (2002). The Baka are often discriminated against and in debt to the Bantus because of a system of credit and very low wages paid in cash.

#### *Djaka and Matoto (FSC-certified UFA in Pokola)*

The villages of Djaka and Matoto (Table 1) are located in Pokola district (which is also the base camp of the logging company) and are easily accessible by boat on the Sangha River and by car via maintained forest tracks. Timber harvesting has greatly contributed to the expansion of Pokola city, surrounding villages and the local road network. The UFA covers an area of 452 000 ha (Congolaise Industrielle des Bois 2007). In both villages, NTFPs, swidden agriculture and market gardens (cassava and bananas) provide the main sources of subsistence and income for women. Women are principally involved in planting the cuttings, harvesting and processing the products. Bantu men fish, hunt and are involved in agricultural work – selecting the fields, cutting the trees, clearing the soil and burning debris. The Baka mostly live by hunting, fishing and working in the Bantus' fields as day labourers and servants.

At the time of the study, the logging company (certificate holder) was operating in three UFAs: Pokola, Kabo and Loundoungou/Toukoulaka. The Pokola UFA, focus of the study, was certified in 2006 and a management plan (Congolaise Industrielle des Bois 2007) was elaborated based on the FSC standard – which is a condition for certification. Following an annual audit, the certificate for Pokola was suspended in 2014

and reinstated in 2015<sup>6</sup>. The certificate covers 10 villages including Djaka and Matoto and adjacent forests. Under the certificate, the company is committed to ensuring the usage rights of local populations in the unit. This was done through a consultation committee involving local populations, including an information and sensitization mechanism to maintain participatory forest management based on FPIC. The company was also committed to contributing to local development, including the promotion of alternative economic activities through the Local Development Fund, funded by the company and co-managed by representatives of the local communities, district administration, nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) and the company. 859 men and 31 women were employed by the logging company.

#### *Egaba and Bolozo (Non-FSC certified UFA in Tala-Tala)*

Egaba and Bolozo (Table 1) are located in Tala-Tala district, which is about 200 km west of Ouésso, along the Ngoko River and at the Cameroonian border. Access to Tala-Tala and particularly Bolozo, is not easy as forest tracks are not maintained, making these villages isolated from external actors. The UFA covers an area of about 617 140 ha (ITTO 2010), for which there is no management plan. At the time of the study, the logging company employed 350 men and 13 women. In both villages, forest products and swidden agriculture are the primary forms of activity and income for women. Cacao cultivation, fishing and hunting are the dominant forms of subsistence for men. The Baka also work in the Bantus' fields as day labourers and servants. In Bolozo, there are significant conflicts between the Bantu and the Baka people, leading to the division of the village into two areas, separated by a 5-km forest track.

## Data collection and analysis

### *Semi-structured interviews*

Data was collected through semi-structured interviews with 18 participants in the Pokola UFA and 41 participants in the Tala-Tala UFA (Table 2). These interviews focused on livelihood strategies, resources, incomes and the typology<sup>7</sup> of decision making at the village level, as well as providing a broad understanding of the contextual setting. The typology analysis drew on Agarwal's framework (2001) to collect information about meeting attendance and the level of participation. Table 3 shows that the framework comprises seven variables ranging from *no attendance* to *influential* and *interactive* types of participation. Two more variables were added to examine whether the respondents feel they are respected by other members of the village, and whether they feel they could become leaders. The participants were selected based on their gender, social status, occupation and age, after an observation walk and census of the households were completed. Village elders and representatives assisted the research assistant and author in identifying family and

<sup>6</sup> The certificate for the Loundoungou/Toukoulaka UFA remained unaffected.

<sup>7</sup> By typology, we mean a set of characteristics and components of participation in the decision-making process.

TABLE 1 *Population size of the studied villages (including children)*

UFA	Village	Women	Men	Total population	Total households
FSC UFA	Djaka	54	61	115	40
Pokola	Matoto	77	73	150	32
NON-FSC UFA	Egaba	172	158	330	44
Tala-Tala	Bolozo	187	171	358	56

FSC = Forest Stewardship Council, UFA = forest management unit.

TABLE 2 *Participants of individual interviews*

Villages	Men		Total	Women		Total	Overall total
	Bantu	Baka		Bantu	Baka		
<b>Djaka</b>	2	2	4	1	3	4	8
<b>Matoto</b>	2	3	5	2	3	5	10
<b>Total Pokola</b>	4	5	9	3	6	9	18
<b>Egaba</b>	6	4	10	7	4	11	21
<b>Bolozo</b>	6	4	10	6	4	10	20
<b>Total Tala-Tala</b>	12	8	20	13	8	21	41
<b>Overall total</b>	16	13	29	16	14	30	59

TABLE 3 *Adapted participation typology framework*

Variables	Measurement indicators
No attendance	The respondent does not attend the village meetings
Passive participation	The respondent is only informed of decisions ex post facto; or attending meetings and listening without speaking up
Consultative participation	The respondent attends meetings and is asked an opinion in specific matters without guarantee of influencing the decisions
Influential participation	The respondent is able to influence others over decisions in the public sphere
Full and interactive participation	The respondent is able to participate in decision making and the creation of rules
Respect	The respondent feels respected by other members of the village
Leadership	The respondent feels he/she can be a leader

single households, as they had a good knowledge of their community and of how the villages are structured and assets allocated. A proportionate number of Bantu and Baka households were selected.

#### *Focus groups*

In addition, female-only focus group discussions were conducted with a total of 133 women, whose ages ranged from 13 to 75 (Table 4). The objective was to capture the most salient perceived causes of women's marginalization from participation in the public sphere. Draft limitations were gathered from the household interviews, then grouped into a list of factors and presented to the female participants by the research team (Table 5). These factors were discussed by the women and the research team together. Each woman selected the factors that they perceive as the most relevant limitations to women's participation. Mixed-gender focus groups and key informant

interviews were also used to compare the information. In each of the mixed-gender groups, the desired number of participants was 15. However, it was difficult to count the exact number of participants, as some would arrive or leave in the middle of the discussions. The team also conducted field observations and informal discussions while walking in and around the villages and through the forest to reach some plantations.

To avoid biases in the responses and potential conflicts, separate Bantu and Baka discussion groups were held. The small sample size enabled sufficient time to explain the questions and retrieve high-quality information from the households – taking into consideration the communication barriers with the Baka women, as it required extra time for them to confide in the research team. A male research assistant interpreting in Lingala was present throughout the investigation.

TABLE 4 *Participants in the focus groups*

Villages	Women only			Mixed-gender
	Bantu	Baka	Total	
Djaka	9	9	18	15
Matoto	11	19	30	15
<b>Total Pokola</b>	20	28	48	30
Egaba	30	16	46	15
Bolozo	27	12	39	15
<b>Total Tala-Tala</b>	57	28	85	30
<b>Overall total</b>	77	56	133	60

TABLE 5 *Constraints on women's participation*

Description	
1	Lack of self-confidence and shame of voicing opinions
2	Self-withdrawing from the village meetings
3	Lack or absence of motivation for women to organize themselves into groups
4	Burden of domestic and productive work
5	Lack or absence of harmony between women
6	Lack or absence of female leader(s)
7	Times and locations of the meetings
8	Traditional rules and village customs
9	Men's and/or husband's prohibition on attending meetings
10	Bantus intimidation of the Baka women
11	The formal and informal exclusion of women from the village meetings

## RESULTS

### Decision-making structures and processes

In the FSC-certified UFA, village projects and development activities are discussed and voted on in the Conseil de Concertation (District Council Committee) and the Comité de Suivi (Evaluation Committee). These are the largest multi-stakeholder decision-making structures and are implemented under the management plan. The objective of the District Council is to inform communities, promote participatory forest management, facilitate conflict mediation and resolution, review and approve micro-projects and activities, and manage the budget of the Fond de Développement Local (Local Development Fund). The members of the District Council must include at least two “semi-nomadic people”, of which one should be a woman (MDDEFÉ 2010). The Evaluation Committee oversees the development of the projects and activities funded by the Local Development Fund.

The results of this study showed that women do not have sufficient representation to influence in these governance

committees, since there is just one woman on the District Council. Rules of entry and membership are strict, as they are determined by a local government decree and the UFA management plan. They favour people of high rank, such as traditional community leaders or local councillors, who usually are men (Personal conversation with the head teacher in Egaba, 2014). The Council President, based in Ouésso, also stated “women are often too busy with domestic chores to attend meetings, besides when they attend they do not even speak up”.

At village level, in Djaka and Matoto, there is a management committee comprising a president, a vice-president, a secretary and occasionally a treasurer, who are all Bantu men. A majority of Bantu men are landowners of high rank or established leaders whose authority is based on lineage and family linkages. Customary authority is not only represented through land titles, but also through the elders' committee. This committee has an important advisory role on customary issues or sensitive questions where no unanimous solution can be found. In addition, under traditional rules, when women make a claim, the decision is often taken to the ‘sacred forest’, which can only be accessed by men. A Bantu member of the Djaka committee said “Once, men discovered women fishing by the river. Women were not allowed because they had not received the approval from the customary leaders and some men raped them for punishment”.

A female gender officer was hired by the logging company to sensitize communities about gender issues and ensure that women are actively involved in forest management, particularly the micro-projects funded by the Local Development Fund. Yet, interviews revealed that women do not actively participate. Women specifically complained that they are never included in the decision-making processes, even in cases that concern them. The gender specialist reported a lack of motivation among the women to initiate social groups or take part in small agricultural projects. She mentioned one example where a cassava field funded by the Local Development Fund was allocated to a mixed group of Bantu and Baka women. The field was left abandoned because women were not interested in permanent field agriculture and the Bantu and the Baka women did not cooperate together because of ethnic divisions. Interviews with women confirmed that they prefer harvesting NTPFs and swidden agriculture to practicing permanent field agriculture. However, three of the Bantu women expressed their regrets and went back to cultivate the field that had long been abandoned.

Egaba and Bolozo are not characterized by external decision-making patterns, as the UFA is not managed, but rather by groups that people have created for themselves. Both villages hold informal women's groups with discussions about daily issues, allowing them to make claims when necessary and barter their harvests. In addition, Egaba has a mixed-gender cooperative called Association Maman Sassou (AMASS) run by a female president and a female secretary. It was created in 2012 and aims to promote intra-village solidarity and develop sustainable agricultural practices. The president was selected by the population through an election

process. Interviews confirmed that she was elected because of her good relationships with the Bantus, the Baka people and the village leader, but also because of her negotiating competences and knowledge of agricultural activities. The association has 12 women members, of which 3 own agricultural plots through their customary lineage, and 18 men. It has a mix of Bantu and Baka members. It functions with membership fees (one per household) and funds are redistributed to the members who are most in need (for events like childbirth, sickness, burial, domestic accidents, etc.). The association also used to promote sustainable agriculture, encouraging its members to domesticate certain seeds and reduce harmful practices, particularly with cacao crops and the inappropriate exploitation of NTFPs. It also tried to fund the purchase of collective agricultural equipment. However, the cooperative reported having great difficulties in selling their harvests because of their isolation from the main road and markets. Thus they reduced their commercial activities and focused on solidarity and social cases.

In Bolozo, two Bantu women lead a women's group and the school parenting committee. Their election was suggested by the village residents and approved by the traditional leader. The Baka, especially women, are bullied and excluded from the village decision-making mechanisms and are never consulted, even within their own group of people. The Baka women appeared to be extremely reserved and afraid of speaking to the research team, even in a small women-only group. Thus, the discussions were conducted one to one.

### Typology of participation

In Djaka and Matoto, influential and interactive forms of participation in decision making are mostly spread among men (see Table 6). Out of 9 women, 5 said they attend village meetings and 2 said they are able to influence decisions at home through their husband. Nonetheless, all the female respondents reported that they are not asked for an opinion in public and never take part in decision making. Regardless of their social status, 6 out of 9 women said they feel respected in their village and only 1 Bantu woman said she could be a leader if she was trained for it, while another said "maybe".

By contrast, in Egaba and Bolozo overall women participate more. Out of 21 women, 9 said they are asked an opinion in public, 10 said they can influence others and 5 said they participate in the villages' decision making. Thus, the participation gap is much less significant than in the other two villages. Similarly on the question on leadership, the responses are more balanced between sexes, where 10 out of 21 women said they could become leaders (5 said they want to and 5 others said "maybe"). Regardless of sex, the Bantus scored the highest levels of participation compared with the Baka across both UFA. While some Baka women are consulted, they complained that they have no influence on others and do not take part in decision making. They are the most marginalized group, even among women. This gap is particularly visible in Bolozo, where there are significant divisions and conflicts between the Bantu and the Baka people. A high level of discrimination against the Baka women is reported.

TABLE 6 *Typology of participation*

Djaka and Matoto (FSC)	Men				Women			
	Bantu	Baka	Total	%	Bantu	Baka	Total	%
The respondent does not attend meetings	1	0	1	11	1	2	3	33
The respondent attends meetings only	0	4	4	44	1	4	5	56
The respondent is asked for an opinion	2	0	2	22	0	0	0	0
The respondent influences others	3	2	5	56	2	0	2	22
The respondent takes part in decision making	2	1	3	33	0	0	0	0
The respondent feels respected in the village	4	4	8	89	3	3	6	67
The respondent feels he/she could be a leader	1	1	2	22	2*	0	1	22
Egaba and Bolozo (Non-FSC)	Men				Women			
	Bantu	Baka	Total	%	Bantu	Baka	Total	%
The respondent does not attend meetings	0	3	3	15	0	1	1	5
The respondent attends meetings only	4	3	7	35	3	3	6	29
The respondent is asked for an opinion	2	1	3	15	5	4	9	43
The respondent influences others	9	1	10	50	10	0	10	48
The respondent takes part in decision making	6	1	7	35	5	0	5	24
The respondent feels respected in the village	11	5	16	80	13	8	21	100
The respondent feels he/she could be a leader	6	1	7	35	10**	0	10	48

\* Including one Bantu woman who responded "maybe"

\*\* Including five Bantu women who responded "maybe"

**Perceived barriers to women’s participation**

Although women are critical socioeconomic agents in the four surveyed villages, they encounter substantial cultural, social and structural barriers to their full participation. When observing men and women’s daily activities and dynamics, the research team noted that the Bantu and Baka women have multiple roles as farmers, NTPF harvesters, housewives and cash earners. This evident multiplicity of productive, reproductive and domestic workloads means reduced time available for women to participate in village meetings. However, when assessing their perceived constraints, women did not report this over-burdening as a major obstacle to their full participation. Women think the multiplicity of their role is normal because it is culturally rooted and accepted, and this is what their community expects from them.

Figure 1 shows that women perceive their marginalization in decision-making mechanisms as arising from a combination of several overlapping limiting factors, including traditions, lack of self-confidence, institutional patterns, intimidation and disharmony. The range of limitations is greater in Djaka and Matoto, where women are not members of any local initiatives or endogenous groupings. Overall, the major constraints to women’s participation in order of importance, as perceived by women interviewees, are: the absence of harmony, exclusion patterns and disinterest. The top three limitations identified by the Bantu women are the female conflicts within their own clans, the absence of cohesion and

leadership and disinterest. Exclusion, tradition, and intimidation by the Bantus are the major limitations perceived by the Baka women. The Baka also said they lack confidence to speak in public due to their low education level and suffer from the general disharmony with the Bantu people. Furthermore, the Baka women tend to withdraw from meetings due to disinterest and an overall lack of motivation to organize themselves into a group, as they think that such events will not bring any change to their lives.

By contrast, in Egaba and Bolozo, endogenous groupings such as the local association AMASS and other groups were observed. Figure 2 indicates that the major constraints to women’s participation, as perceived by women interviewees, in order of importance are: traditions, intimidation and disinterest. In Bolozo, although there are two endogenous women’s groups, Baka women are totally excluded as part of ongoing ethnic divisions and intimidation from the Bantus. Furthermore, Baka men forbid their wives from attending village meetings to protect them from being assaulted. However, Baka women stated that they are not even allowed to attend mixed-gender meetings within their own ethnic community as their husbands are jealous of other Baka men. During the discussion groups with the Baka women, none of them would talk; but they responded to the research team’s questions when spoken to privately. Clearly they suffer from intimidation by the Bantus, the weight of tradition and a lack of self-confidence. Figure 2 further indicates that the Baka women from Egaba also suffer from intimidation and the

FIGURE 1 *Perceived barriers to women’s participation by women in Djaka and Matoto*

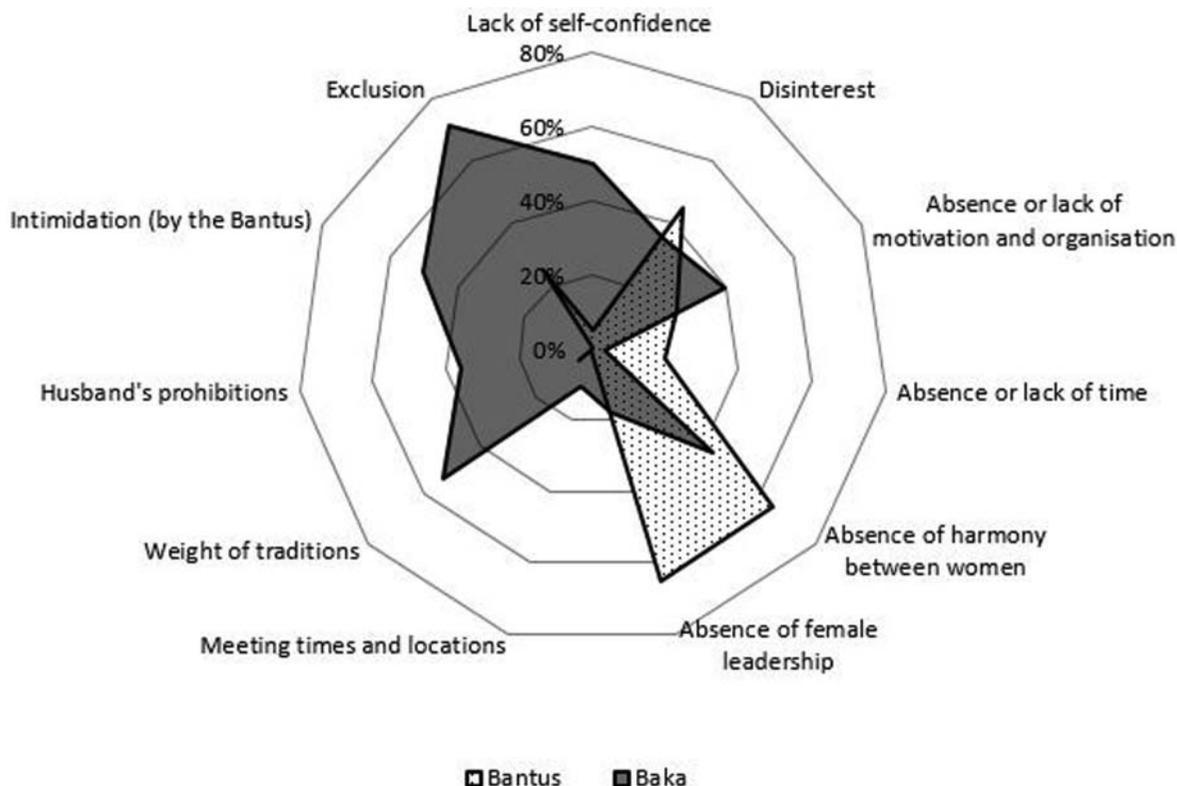
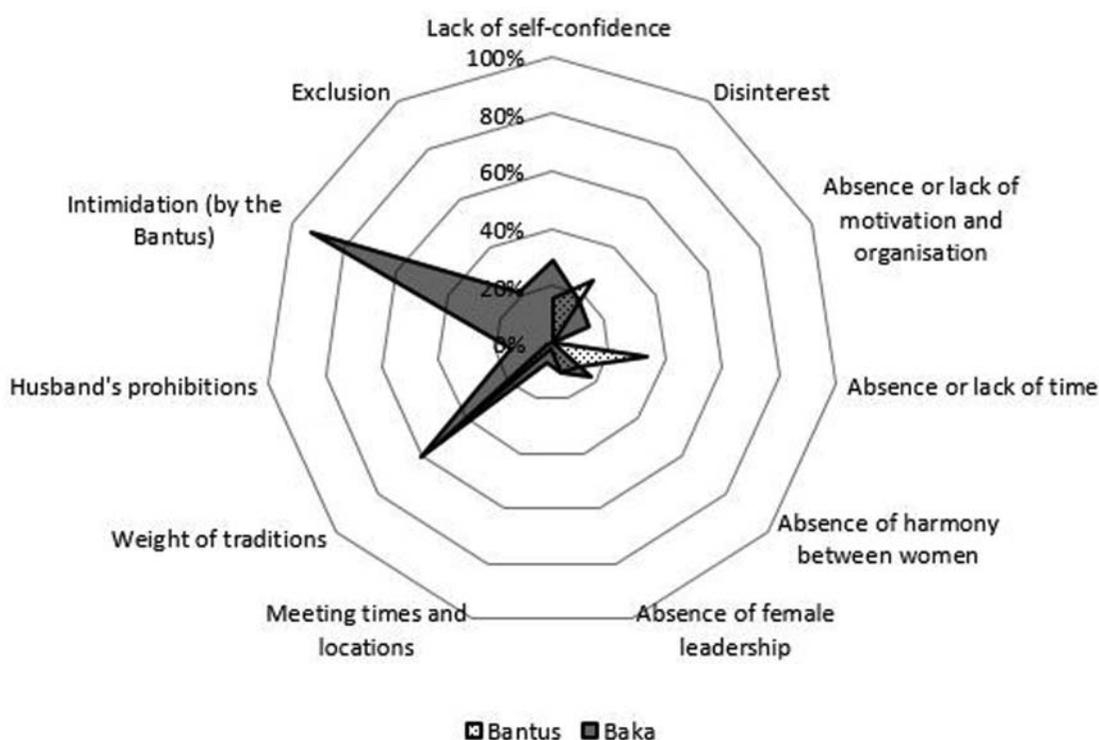


FIGURE 2 Perceived barriers to women’s participation by women in Egaba and Bolozo



weight of tradition. However, the endogenous women’s group offers a greater path to integration because members are part of a collective action and they feel that dialogue is open with Bantu women. They reported being used to voicing their opinions and feeling confident in themselves in doing so. When interviewed, the Bantu women said they are motivated to participate and talk, they experienced good relations with other women, notably the Baka and want to form self-organized groups.

DISCUSSION

This study investigates the level of inclusiveness in the forest management decision-making mechanisms of four villages, and the perceived barriers to women’s participation in decision making. Findings suggest that in both UFAs populations are heterogeneous in their composition and men and women have distinct roles and needs. The non-certified UFA is characterized by internally driven decision-making processes, where women and men are actively engaged in local groups, allowing the representativeness and cohesion of their community, in particular in Egaba. By contrast, the certified UFA is characterized by externally driven processes monopolized by Bantu men, social and ethnic conflict, lack of collective action and cultural norms that are difficult to challenge. This suggests that an internally driven community group system, with members who share a common goal – of sustainable development, forest management or another interest – can be a successful engine for cohesion and collective action, which is necessary for certification. Four key findings are discussed below.

Internally versus externally driven decision-making mechanisms

Djaka and Matoto, the villages of the FSC-certified UFA, are characterized by external processes and agencies with strict rules of entry and membership governing community projects. Findings show that key decision-making mechanisms, such as the Local Development Fund, the District Council and the Evaluation Committee, on which the villages depend, operate within a male-dominated environment. The presence of one Baka woman on Pokola District Council is merely symbolic, to achieve the minimum legal gender requirement mandated by the *Decree N°2668 Conseil de Concertation ZDC de Pokola* (MDDEF 2010) and the UFA management documents.

Because women’s voices and capacity are limited, their opinions, needs and aspirations remain misunderstood or unconsidered. The existing decision-making mechanisms have not enabled the consideration of women’s opinions and aspirations, nor fostered their full participation. By contrast, Egaba and Bolozo are characterized by endogenous and informal decision-making processes, related to the willingness of local men and women to engage in varied activities, including local associations and informal women’s discussions groups. Women are more likely to voice their opinions through the channels and networks they have created for themselves.

The findings suggest that exogenous mechanisms do not suffice to represent women’s needs and aspirations, take into consideration gender differentiated opportunities and needs, or promote the full and effective participation of women. The findings also call into question the social reliability,

legitimacy and representativeness of the village committees as the unique interface between the communities and the logging company. These committees emphasize strongly rooted relationships and traditional hierarchies between certain types of actors around whom power gravitates. Gupte (2004) explained that such hierarchical and stratified leadership adversely affects women's participation, as their needs are not considered. They are left out of the participatory process and are not consulted on forest management. Such a structure reinforces formal exclusion and marginalization of women. This could partly explain why attempts by the certified logging company to mobilize women, even with the support of a gender adviser and participatory approaches, as well as a reserved seat for a woman in the District Committee, have been unsuccessful.

Increasing women's representation in forest management committees alone may not be sufficient to encourage full and influential female participation, since such a positive discriminatory instrument does not directly address deeply entrenched circumstances, attitudes or psychological barriers causing the gender imbalance. Quotas are an important entry point for bringing women into decision-making positions and encouraging reform, but they are not an end goal (Hust 2002). For Hust, women's empowerment must go beyond quotas, including building women's capacity, addressing structural inequalities and mitigating barriers. Also, quotas do not guarantee that elected women will effectively promote other women's interests, and it is unclear what the common benefit might be without a strong women's movements.

### Different degrees of participation

The findings show different degrees of participation in both sites. They highlight the fact that attendance at meetings and being consulted do not necessarily lead to the highest levels of participation. This is also in line with previous studies (Agarwal 2001 and 2010, Lewark *et al.* 2011). The findings indicate that in the non-FSC site, where some women are consulted, their voice does not necessarily count in decision making at the village level. The women that are able to be vocal and to influence others are members or leaders of a self-started network or group. The fact that some women are part of a collaborative action makes them feel stronger, more valuable and capable of sharing ideas and propositions with their community. This suggests that women's groups and their leaders can have a positive effect on representation, and the capacity to influence decision making at the village level.

The example of Egaba shows that the formal and informal participation of a few women has a real peer effect. The existence of the association AMASS offers other women the possibility to access and share information, and take on strategic roles, as well as gain strength, become more vocal and make their contributions visible. It also boosts women's interest in village affairs, raises their self-confidence and enhances their ability to articulate demands and contribute meaningfully to the village. Equally, the presence of informal women's groups is beneficial, notably for the Baka women who feel better integrated in the community and have greater self-confidence. These self-developed initiatives are based on

the community's own will and identified needs, encouraging a sense of ownership and group identity. They contribute to social cohesion and solidarity, and create a positive atmosphere as well as weakening rigid discriminatory social norms.

By contrast, in Djaka and Matoto there is an absence of cohesion, ownership and collective effort among women, coinciding with the absence of endogenous groups. Women do not have the opportunity to challenge hierarchies and traditional leadership, and are by contrast embedded in them. These social structures perpetuate their passivity in decision making and limit any potential for future participation. This further weakens the representation of the only woman sitting on the Local Development Fund Committee, as there are no collaborative initiatives between women to make their voices heard across the village.

### Cultural and social norms

The findings show that the major limitations to women's full and active participation, as perceived by women interviewees, are rooted in cultural and social norms. Traditions and customs define a set of behavioural standards to which women need to adhere. This is acknowledged as a major reason for the perpetuation of a patriarchal culture that restrains women's participation.

Gender norms shape intra-village relations, define the rules of participation and decision making, and dictate productive and domestic tasks. Women often reported that they do not feel confident and capable of talking in front of male community members. Besides, they said their primary role is domestic and productive (cleaning, cooking, planting, harvesting, and looking after the children). They also complained of strict rules restricting them from the traditional decision-making structures. The difference between the villages of the certified and the non-certified sites is that in the latter some women decided to challenge those gender norms and self-start their own group. This in turn had a positive effect, weakening the restrictive norms, combatting men's negative attitude and enhancing women's participation.

Intimidation by the Bantus of the Baka women is a clear impediment to their participation in village decision-making processes. Individual interviews confirmed that historical psychological and physical intimidation has shaped the relations between the Bantu and the Baka in the studied sites, where the Baka have long been considered subhuman and without any rights. It is women who suffer the most from this discrimination. Shame and lack of confidence result from such intimidation, perpetuating a history of perceived inferiority, timidity, rejection and fear of expression. In Djaka, Matoto and Bolozo, the Baka women made a clear link between intimidation and their lack of motivation and interest in village affairs and projects.

Apart from gender norms, conflict is also a barrier to women's participation. Djaka and Matoto are characterized by conflict between women and a general absence of female unity and solidarity, leading to a lack of leadership and motivation. For example, in Djaka, the absence of motivation and the existence of conflict between the Baka and the Bantu women, could partly explain why the women's cassava

farming project, funded by the Local Development Fund, was abandoned in 2014. Another explanation is the fact that the Local Development Fund Committee did not take into consideration the social dynamics, agency capacities and interests.

In Egaba and Bolozo, the creation of the self-help association has boosted women's self-confidence and participation levels, as well as inculcating a sense of solidarity and cooperation. It has also challenged traditional hierarchies. Women have a great incentive to form a group if members think that it provides a forum to support each other. It also provides the opportunity for some women to hold strategic positions and relay information. Even so, in Egaba and Bolozo, women's access to strategic positions in these groups seems to be shaped by local social connections and dynamics. Women with a higher social and economic status are those principally favoured, most notably women with strong relationships with the traditional leaders and important male figures.

### **Scaling up women-only and mixed-gender initiatives in a multi-level approach**

With the elaboration of the new FSC P&C and the FPIC guidelines, an improved strategic approach and commitment are needed to effectively raise gender awareness and ensure inclusion at every stage, allowing women and marginalized groups to voice their concerns and needs. A key policy implication to draw upon, is the importance of addressing the internal and external barriers faced by women and marginalized groups, as well as their capacity for agency. This requires a multi-level approach, encouraging the development of internally driven initiatives in order to challenge the established hierarchies and traditional exclusion patterns, such as membership rules or social norms, and meet the needs of externally driven forest management processes. Programmes targeting grassroots women's initiatives should be implemented and mixed dialogue frameworks reinforced in all the villages to understand and adequately address the psychological and organizational barriers women face.

While programmes targeting both men and women are equally important, it is necessary to emphasize the beneficial impact of women-only opportunities. Opening up discussion spaces and self-help groups for women and the less vocal is one step toward facilitating their active participation (Cornwall 2003, Gupte 2004, Pokharel 2008, Siripurapu and Geores 2016, Subramaniam *et al.* 2002). Such initiatives could build collective and individual capacity for participation, cooperation and eventually leadership by providing a safe interface for women to gain experience before taking on more active roles in externally driven mixed-gender groups, like the Local Development Fund or other committees. One advantage of such initiatives would be that a strong foundation of female participation and leadership could be scaled up to mixed-gender groups, which would be more effective in enabling higher quality women's involvement (IFAD 2014). Additionally, creating or reinforcing the establishment of collaborative initiatives, such as women's associations, self-help groups or cooperatives that value women's skills and

experiences (e.g. handicrafts, backyard poultry, local forest products, etc.), could be an effective way to foster a sense of ownership and collective efforts as demonstrated in this study.

The study further recommends that forest stakeholders (government, logging companies, civil society, conservation partners and certification bodies) unequivocally encourage an increase in women's representation in formal decision-making mechanisms, such as the forest management committees, along with capacity building and informal self-started groups. Furthermore, gender differentiated socioeconomic agents, rights and needs must be explicitly recognized in forest management procedures and strategies. Such developments imply a potentially important role for gender-related commitments across the FSC policies, standards and criteria, as well as in the Congolese forest sector, particularly since the government has pledged its commitment to international gender-related standards and regulations.

### **CONCLUSION**

This paper offers a comparative assessment of the level of inclusiveness in decision-making mechanisms in an FSC-certified and a non-certified forest management unit in the Republic of the Congo. Although the FSC has been positively associated with the political devolution of participation in forest management to local populations, Djaka and Matoto exemplify how decision-making mechanisms solely based on externally determined rules, can make women's meaningful involvement difficult, if not impossible.

Women are under-represented in forest-related decision-making processes. This has a significant impact on their capacity to voice their concerns and preferences but also to develop self-confidence and public speaking skills. In the non-certified UFA, a few women are increasingly vocal through small groups and associations where they have the opportunity to express their concerns. Even if women still face some constraints to participation, they experience far more unity and solidarity. Some of them enjoy strategic positions and have the support of the male elites. Thus, this study suggests that the internally driven mechanisms within those villages contribute to and reinforce the basis for meaningful participation. A multi-level approach between internally and externally driven processes is recommended to foster solid, long-term, meaningful community participation. This way endogeneity is maximized to meet the exogenous needs of the FSC mechanisms.

Although the FSC has just begun to take gender into consideration in its latest P&C (FSC 2015) and FPIC Guidelines (FSC 2012c), improved approaches are required in support of gender equity mainstreaming in the FSC policies and standards and throughout its members. Further research will be needed to consider the evolution of the status of women prior to and after certification. Questions over the need for endogenous approaches to increase women's participation are also likely to arise in the future. Powerful standards like the FSC, which have already achieved great social advancement, will need a robust enhanced approach toward learning about the gender aspects and needs of forest certification.

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