



CV4C Impact Stories • March 2020

Advances in Independent Forest Monitoring are bringing change to the forests of the Congo Basin

How innovation, collaboration and partnerships have revolutionised IM capabilities, methods and attitudes in five project countries

This information leaflet recalls several stories of real, meaningful and lasting change, realised through years of collaboration, hard work and innovation.

These efforts are the work of several civil society organisations that are motivated to implement the behaviour and systems required to ensure that Independent Forest Monitoring (IM) becomes an effective mechanism for improved forest management and governance.

These impact stories are the results of coordinated efforts within and between countries, where lessons are shared, support is at hand, and goals are aligned.



The project baseline

The application of Independent Forest Monitoring was at very different stages in the five project countries.

In **Cameroon**, official or mandated IM (undertaken through an agreement with the government) ended in 2013 and since then civil society alone has taken the responsibility to independently monitor the forest sector. The lack of official IM involvement resulted in a reported increase in cases of corruption and illegalities, contributing negatively to the global perception of timber sourced from Cameroon.

In the **Republic of Congo**, the 2000 Forest Code (under revision) integrated the provision for civil society led and mandated IM. However the mandated forest monitor operated largely alone. Promoting a wider, decentralised cadre of national civil society monitors, including interaction with the evolving REDD+ strategy was a key national need.

In the **Central African Republic** the armed conflict brought its own set of unique challenges for IM. Although civil society led IM was provided for in the Voluntary Partnership Agreement (VPA) texts, IM practice was still in its infancy in this post-conflict context and characterised by relatively 'immature' civil society. Years of conflict and lack of resources resulted in total lack of forest control by the Administration.

In the **Democratic Republic of Congo** (DRC) mandated IM was conducted by *Observatoire de la Gouvernance Forestiere (OGF)* from 2012. As the only mandated civil society organisation undertaking IM, OGF struggled to fulfil the needs of such a vast country. Without engagement from other critical organisations, OGF could not influence the necessary responses from government to produce meaningful change.

Meanwhile, in **Gabon** there was no history of independent forest monitoring by civil society at all. Furthermore, there was limited national third-party oversight of the forest and natural resource sector in Gabon. These modest civil society efforts to monitor the forest sector were further undermined by a significant lack of appreciation and acceptance of IM on the part of decision makers, the private sector and other actors. Opportunities and synergies were missed due to a lack of coordination amongst the civil society actors and there were limited opportunities for cross-country learning and engagement with law enforcement agencies.

Across the board the role of IM had been limited by weak institutional capacities and inconsistencies in the methodologies and approaches used, including a lack of clear quality standards. Most of the documented evidence lacked the robustness to withstand scrutiny. Taken together these factors damaged the trust and credibility of monitors. Monitoring findings were rarely acted upon by the forest authorities and the very role of civil society in monitoring was heavily contested. Additionally, the monitoring work done by civil society, indigenous peoples and communities was not readily accepted by the private sector, law makers, anti-corruption committees, importers and Competent Authorities (CAs) in Europe or elsewhere.

This leaflet focuses on the changes brought about by the project in addressing some of these challenges in the sub region.

CV4C

STORIES OF CHANGE

in the Congo Basin



Regional and International: Standardisation and Lesson Learning

Where IM was doubted, it is now accepted.

The differing approaches and often haphazard manner of IM implementation in each of the 5 countries caused confusion or provoked criticism from both the private sector and national administrations. The poor coordination of civil society did not help in clarifying the role and purpose of the approach.

Following the detailed analysis of the sector and the completion of needs assessments and support missions, CV4C regional partner FLAG drew up **operational procedures and tools** with support from CIDT. This was done using a set of **Principles, Criteria and Indicators** for each stage of the IM process; starting from preparation of monitoring missions, right through to report writing. This has created a **comprehensive framework for robust, credible and efficient IM**. The set of Principles, Criteria and Indicators and accompanying toolkit is a lever for regional standardisation via the newly established Pan African Network of IM organisations (PA-OI), which offers a powerful foundation to **build IM credibility and enhance quality**.

The promotion of high quality independent platforms, such as the FLEGT WATCH and Open Timber Portal, for radar based alerts and publishing reports, has resulted in **vastly increased acceptance and engagement** by stakeholders. Forest governance forums (FGF), conferences with Interpol and European Union lobby tours organised by CIDT and partners have provided an opportunity for IM organisations to share their experiences but also to improve recognition and acceptance of the role of IM in improving forest legality and transparency.

Cameroon

Where IM was well established it has now been enhanced to follow internationally recognised quality standards.



Cameroon has a long history of both mandated and civil society led IM. It is one of the countries in which IM started in Central Africa. In Cameroon IM is more mature, supported by a cadre of relatively well experienced and technically competent individuals and organisations. CV4C national partners CED and FODER have many years of experience and competence in IM. The challenges faced were around standardisation, replication and addressing the inherent conflict that has always existed in IM in which the monitoring organisation also undertook advocacy activities. This 'police, judge and jury' situation compromised the credibility of IM. To address these challenges, FODER started developing an innovative approach that sought to incorporate ISO standards into the IM process. This approach is the **Standardised System of Independent External Observation**, now popularly known by its French acronym as SNOIE. SNOIE, which has been developed by civil society in collaboration with the administration and other forest stakeholders, has proved a massive success.

In 2018, SNOIE officially obtained its **Certificate of Conformity to the ISO 9001:2015 standard** with the financial support of the CV4C project and the technical support of CIDT. The standard is used by organisations to demonstrate their ability to consistently meet regulatory requirements and demonstrate continuous improvement. This is the **first civil society approach to natural resource monitoring that has been certified in the world**. It provides a huge stamp of quality assurance and an obligation to maintain quality standards. Reports and denunciations made are regularly acted on by the Ministry of Forests and Wildlife, many being the subject of law enforcement missions. Actions undertaken by the Ministry have included fines of over 100,000 euros to companies, seizure of timber, and initiation of legal proceedings and suspension of permits in one year.

The SNOIE approach is now being replicated in Congo, DRC and Gabon. SNOIE has enabled IM to:

- Be standardised under an internationally recognised standard that is acceptable by the private sector and other stakeholders
- Provide clear and separate roles for monitoring and advocacy organisations within one system
- Bring together a network of competent and specialised organisations to monitor the natural resources sector
- Allow for independent third party verification of the IM process to ensure confidence in the process by all stakeholders.

Democratic Republic of Congo

Where organisations were disconnected, there is collaboration.

Whilst several organisations across this vast country were undertaking IM -including OGF – which is the only organisation mandated by government - activities were not well coordinated or structured and impact was marginal. Besides, the vastness of the country created logistical challenges for OGF to cover the whole country including the huge cost associated with undertaking IM in the provinces by an organisation based in Kinshasa. The CV4C project enabled action on a plan to form a **nation-wide network of independent monitors - RENOI**. RENOI has national coverage and brings together all national NGOs involved in mandated and non-mandated IM. Organisations now pool efforts and communicate to ensure that governance of natural resources is built on a national strategy, charter and action plan, with buy in from all stakeholders. This national synergy has resulted in a **coordinated national presence**. It has brought the message of persistent violations of forest allocations to **national and international awareness**. The pressure is now on the administration to take action on the reports and evidence produced, as well as to continue the funding that the CV4C project has initiated.

Central African Republic

Where IM was immature it has grown and become effective.

After the civil war, forest monitoring had no leadership, no sanctions and no results. But now government presence on the ground is increasing for the first time in 15 years. The CV4C project has enabled effective collaboration between civil society and government authorities, to produce a **system of IM that is organised and structured**, where roles are defined and effective procedures enable **quality preparations, quality investigations** with appropriately **skilled teams**, and **quality outputs**. All of this results in an efficient system capable of yielding actionable results. The CV4C project has supported review of the country's 'summary of forest infractions' after 20 years and operationalised the first multi-stakeholder forest and environmental crime working group in collaboration with the national Interpol focal point office. Due to the growing interest of civil society organisations in IM the project also facilitated the development of a new IM national strategy in order to ensure coordination between different IM approaches.

Gabon

Where there was little activity, there is now expertise.

Gabon had almost no IM experience prior to the project; any monitoring activities were focused on denunciation but concrete evidence was lacking. **Appropriate training** enabled by the CV4C project has brought about change and enabled **rigorous follow up of monitoring activities**. In a country where over 70% of exploitation permits are held by Asian Companies, evidence from IM reports has been used to dismiss guilty government agents and sanction illegal exploitation companies. Mission reports now present **solid facts**, infractions are **geo-mapped**, and **peer review** processes ensure quality information. Independent monitoring is reaching out into sectors other than timber such as community rights and benefit sharing, mining, wildlife and agriculture. For the first time in Gabon, CV4C partner Brainforest led a successful court case on behalf of 17 forest dependent communities against 9 forest companies.

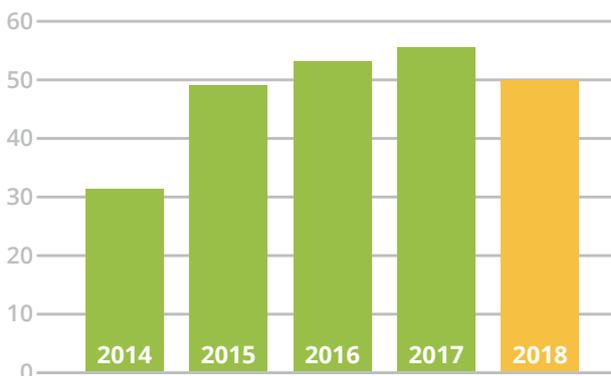
Republic of Congo

Where there was poor collection of forest fines and taxes, now there is transparency and boosted revenue.

The project has facilitated CAGDF to undertake regular IM missions. **52 reports and 10 analytical notes** have been produced by CV4C partner CAGDF (available for viewing and downloading at www.cagdf.org). Through IM outputs, government improved calculation of the surface and export taxes that earned the Treasury **over US\$3,521,270**. IM work has also improved transparency with over 99% of forest permits in the country monitored and reports providing up to date information on collection of forest revenue from companies, management of legal cases and sanctions regime.

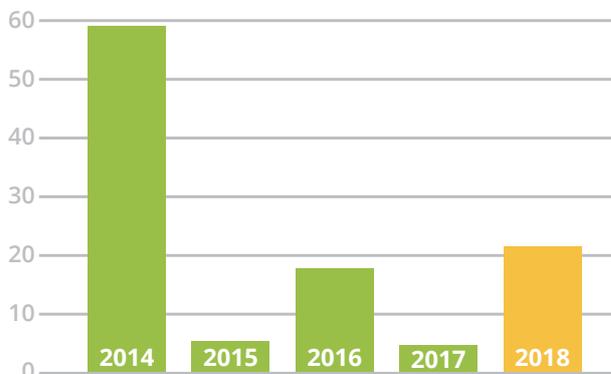
Recovery of Forest Exploitation Taxes

Up to **US\$12,943,296** of uncollected taxes in 2018.



Level of collection of forestry related fines

Only 21% of fines collected with unpaid amounts totalling **US\$1,795,844**.



Source: CAGDF

The favourable decision by the first court ordered the companies to respect their social obligations through funding of community projects. The organisation on national multistakeholder dialogue on the role of forest monitoring and control, has further reinforced the need for developing capacities for monitoring the drivers of deforestation and building national coordination for independent forest monitoring.

“Forest management is a very important issue for the European Union. The aim here is to encourage good coordination and smooth communication between the administration, civil society and economic operators in the context of independent monitoring of the management of natural resources, in order to achieve the objectives of good governance and sustainable forest management.”

EU Ambassador to Gabon, Rosario Bento Pais.



Creating innovative platforms to make IM demand driven and enhance access to IM reports

WRI Open Timber Portal – Incentivising legal timber by improving access to information.

The OTP brings transparency to timber operations by making public previously inaccessible information about on-the-ground management practices and compliance with timber legality requirements. It compiles information from three different sources:

1. Official concession boundaries and the list of registered forest operators from the government.
2. Documents uploaded voluntarily by forest operators to demonstrate compliance.
3. Observations by third party forest monitors.

CV4C forest monitoring organisations upload IM reports on this global platform.

FLEGT WATCH – radar based alert system for monitoring forest loss and illegalities.

The utility of remote sensing for monitoring and forest management is well established and initiatives aimed at providing assistance to stakeholders interested in forest management and in monitoring the evolution of the forest cover have emerged. The FLEGT Watch tool (developed by VisioTerra, Tropenbos and CIDT) is currently used by non-governmental organisations (NGOs) in the context of independent forest observation on deforestation within and outside forest permits. Radar based alerts generated by the system have been used by members of the SNOIE network to identify forest illegalities in Cameroon. The tool is also being rolled out in Gabon and DRC.

The way forward?

It is clear that civil society plays an important role in supporting improved governance, law enforcement, the fight against corruption and increased transparency. Civil society also has an important role in contributing to the development and improvement of forest monitoring tools that can help detect forest crimes, illegal land use and improve forest governance. IM organisations need to improve targeting of key audiences with relevant IM information for decision making. Civil society organisations must continue to innovate in their approaches, expand their actions beyond the forest sector to focus on the key drivers of deforestation in Central Africa. Recent evidence by Curtis et al (2018)¹ demonstrates that commodity driven deforestation, shifting cultivation and forestry are the most important drivers of deforestation. IM organisations must adapt to this dynamic as corporate responsibility efforts to eliminate deforestation from supply chains, as well as international policies designed

to reduce greenhouse gas emissions from deforestation and forest degradation take shape in Central Africa.

Additionally, IM organisations need to focus on new forms of forest crime and illegality beyond forest concessions to adopt value chain/chain of custody and follow the money investigative approaches. This also includes strengthening linkages with anti-corruption committees, ministries of finance and judiciary and developing strong engagement with national, regional and international processes such as CAFI, land use planning processes, FLEGT VPA Traceability systems, review of nationally determined contributions, REDD+ amongst others.

This may require them to build new capacities and capabilities and secure sustained funding in order to continue to play their watchdog roles more effectively in a fast-evolving climate change context.

1. Philip G. Curtis, Christy M. Slay, Nancy L. Harris, Alexandra Tyukavina and Matthew C. Hansen (2018) Classifying drivers of global forest loss, Science 361, 1108–1111.

Citizen Voices for Change (CV4C): Congo Basin Forest Monitoring Project • 2017-2020

Led by the University of Wolverhampton's Centre for International Development and Training (CIDT), this project was designed to establish a strong, sustainable partnership of forest monitoring non-state actors (NSAs) or Civil Society actors in Cameroon, Central African Republic, Democratic Republic of Congo, Gabon and Republic of Congo.

The project sought to address this challenge by strengthening the capacity, influence and long-term viability of IM organisations to perform essential watchdog functions through: increased organisational and operational capacity; improved quality and availability of independent information; viable, constructive and sustainable networks; and effective engagement and response from forest law enforcement agencies, law makers and judiciary in national forest policy processes.

Find out more and read full versions of the stories in this leaflet at www.cidt.org.uk/cv4c
Follow the project on social media: twitter.com/eucv4c • facebook.com/eucv4c