



A Regional Toolbox: FLAG develops critical instruments to empower independent monitors of forestry activity

For the actors who inspect the timber sector in the Congo Basin sub-region, the Field Legality Advisory Group (FLAG) serves as a vital technical resource.

A handful of Cameroonian lawyers and foresters from the Field Legality Advisory Group (FLAG) assisted international organisations with the operational implementation of independent forest monitoring (IM), as the activity took its first steps in the 2000s. When the international organisations moved on to other projects, the FLAG team saw the opportunity to spread their wings, to put their expertise at the service of those throughout the Congo Basin sub-region who wanted to get involved in IM.



All whilst keeping their feet firmly on the ground. “We started off rather timidly, to tell the truth,” explains Serge Moukouri, director in charge of Development and Internal Monitoring at FLAG. “The CV4C [Citizen Voices for Change] project allowed us to accelerate FLAG’s strategic positioning and to consolidate as a regional hub of expertise.”

FLAG’s regional mandate within the CV4C consortium, financed by the European Union and the Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office, enabled them to offer technical assistance to national partners in the five countries concerned, fulfilling their ambition to serve as a reference point for peer-to-peer knowledge-sharing.

The FLAG team identified three main areas to accelerate the sub-regional development of the emergent phenomenon of IM: standardisation of diverse methods; technical assistance to organisations that carry out IM missions on the ground; and the design of a professional development programme, a melting pot in which to shape professionals.

Standardisation of IM through the *Plateforme Africaine d’Observation Indépendante*:

An initial concern was that there were almost as many IM methods as there were monitors. How to bring them all together?

Horline Njike, FLAG general secretary, insists on rigour, “Until then, IM activities were dispersed; no comparison was possible. We wanted to guide IM activity, to provide a space for organisations to share experiences and help each other, and thus ensure that IM is conducted in a professional, credible manner that can be replicated.” Practically speaking, this would translate into greater confidence of IM actors in the field, reflected in IM reports that could be understood and compared across national borders.

To achieve this, FLAG conceptualised the *Plateforme Africaine d’Observation Indépendante* (PA-OI)¹ to bring together a spectrum of key IM organisations from across Africa, including CV4C partners. Moukouri explains, “A starting point to encourage the standardisation of IM methods was to develop a shared definition of what is meant by ‘independent monitoring’, and to develop a clear set of principles, criteria and indicators for IM actors either to be audited or to self-audit, so that on a practical level, monitoring is robust and effective.”

This initiative was greeted with wariness. Some actors considered that their approaches were *already* robust and effective. How to overcome this initial hurdle, given that unsolicited offers of assistance were sometimes brushed aside with a wave of the hand?

1. African Independent Monitoring Platform

Njike smiles, "Indeed, initially some organisations did not adhere 100 per cent to the guidance FLAG offered. There was some confusion – that's human. But the basic idea of PA-OI is to promote the expertise of its members, so if an organisation has competency in a certain area, it can provide assistance to its peers – the platform also set up mechanisms to boost exchanges between actors.

"The technical secretariat of this body is responsible for organising an annual meeting during which participants discuss topics of interest for the development of IM, but also for structuring the platform. The exchange of experiences is what makes it possible to take into account the circumstances of each actor and to integrate everyone." This is what makes the network more than the sum of its parts.



One concrete element that underpins the PA-OI, and will eventually be available for public use, is the creation of a database to centralise the duly validated IM reports from the various organisations from 2000 to the present.

Moukouri sees a wide range of possibilities, "Other resources will be included: the memoranda and protocols establishing the mandated IM organisations, manuals of procedures, methodological tools developed by the actors ... all this will be available on the website; a real one-stop media shop!"

Other resources – analyses of sub-regional trends based on national information, for example – will be posted regularly to highlight issues in different segments of the supply or value chain, and to explore topics of common interest, such as [the analysis of the new Chinese forest law's importance for the sub-region](#). This formidable ambition should be realised in early 2021.

"We wanted to guide IM activity, to provide a space for organisations to share experiences and help each other, and thus ensure that IM is conducted in a professional, credible manner that can be replicated."

Technical assistance to reinforce the quality of IM outputs:

Early on in the project, several partner organisations had raised another important point: To advance IM in the sub-region, a strong foundation of technical assistance was needed. FLAG and CIDT set up a detailed survey to identify specific aspects that the partners found difficult in carrying out monitoring activities. From this diagnosis, the 'technical assistance' component was fleshed out.

"We've offered assistance in two main areas: the development of remote-learning tools, and in situ support for their adaptation and use. This is how FLAG supported *Centre pour l'Information Environnementale et le Développement Durable* (CIEDD) as it reoriented its approach to implementing IM, through diagnosis of the problem and development of an operational procedures manual to effectively conduct field missions," says Moukouri.

"Starting with its IM experience in the context of FLEGT, FLAG created a [practical guide for developing methodologies to monitor REDD+](#) – that's the remote part. Each organisation could adapt the guide to the realities of their context and specific needs in order to produce a bespoke methodology. For example, FLAG supported NGO members [OGE](#) and [CACO-REDD²](#) in the technical process – and that, the *in situ* support."

A final arrow in FLAG's quiver allows independent monitors to fine-tune the quality of their reports: the [Mission Quality Verification \(VQM\)](#) tool.

"We developed a matrix to ensure consistency between the facts observed, the evidence brought forward, and the conclusions and recommendations that were drawn up," explains Njike. "We can go over the mission reports and check that the recommendations put forward truly correspond to the situation described. We try to find each element in the chain of evidence, and to offer additional details: the GPS points of the boundaries of the concessions, for example, or the article of law at issue – roughly speaking, to check the coherence of the whole."

This quality assurance should inspire confidence among the different users of these reports, the stakeholders in various associated initiatives: authorities in national law enforcement, but also actors linked to the REDD+ and FLEGT processes.

IM remains a complex technical enterprise, and although CV4C partners are very familiar with these tools, they remain tricky for external actors to navigate. The FLAG team is therefore planning another step: They would like to make their toolkit (database, VQM matrix, methodological guide) more user friendly and accessible to all those affected by forestry activities – local populations and Indigenous communities who would like to check that their territorial rights and profit-sharing are not being infringed, for example; or possibly operators and competent authorities of EU Member States in the context of application of [the EU Timber Regulation](#).

"Each organisation could adapt the guide to the realities of their context and specific needs in order to produce a bespoke methodology."

Professional development:

A final component of the FLAG initiative is to offer training in order to carry forward the gains of the CV4C project. FLAG facilitated a multi-stakeholder process to develop a curriculum for perfecting the skills of IM actors, a programme of Continuing Education in Monitoring the Management of Natural Resources and the Environment.

This opportunity, open to all, will allow stakeholders in the sector to improve their technical knowledge and strengthen their professional capacities through short-term training adapted to the regional context, and confirmed by a certificate. In keeping with the emphasis on peer-to-peer learning, the [professional development centre](#) hopes to become a neutral space for enduring collaboration among all stakeholders in the protection of natural resources and the environment. Kick-off for the first session is scheduled mid-2021.

And why stop at the timber sector? The methodologies outlined are valid and applicable to all types of natural resource management monitoring – the mining sector, community monitoring of wildlife management. With their optimism and determination to encourage them, the FLAG team has the means to adapt these tools to better protect the Congo Basin's natural riches.



Interview with Horline Njike and Serge Moukouri on 23 November 2020; Nicole Gérard

AT A GLANCE

- 1 Standardisation of IM methods promoted through the *Plateforme Africaine d'Observation Indépendante* (PA-OI)
- 1 Database featuring the duly validated IM reports from different organisations from 2000 to present, as well as other resources (coming soon at [https://pa-oi.org/!](https://pa-oi.org/))
- 1 [Practical guide to develop methodologies](#) for monitoring REDD+
- 1 Analysis matrix to verify the quality of missions ([VQM](#))
- 1 [Professional Development programme](#) in Monitoring the Management of Natural Resources and the Environment
- 12 Technical support missions to partners
- 4 Investigative and information-gathering missions
- 19 Quality verification reviews performed on reports and other IM products
- 2 Reports of common interest published as part of the CV4C project (on [China's new forest law](#) and on the [management of artisanal fishing, to study the feasibility of applying monitoring techniques in fisheries](#))
- 1 Hoped-for ripple effect of IM methodologies in other areas of natural resource management.



Led by the University of Wolverhampton's Centre for International Development and Training (CIDT), the 'Citizen Voices for Change (CV4C)' 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. Find out more at <https://cidt.org.uk/cv4c>.