



Gender responsiveness: Turbulence ahead

Across the Congo Basin, civil society groups are using CV4C tools to craft and implement more inclusive policies and programmes.

Few profound changes in society surge forward continuously, without ever encountering pushback. The organisations involved in the CV4C project have successfully set the course for integrating gender policy in Independent Forest Monitoring (IM), with regard to hiring practices as well as listening to women in their communities. Across the Congo Basin sub-region, however, gender responsiveness seems to be holding its breath.

In the early days of the CV4C project, partners swiftly recognised gender as a key theme for capacity strengthening. The challenges, strategies and methods that this project leaves in its wake, are highlighted in specific cases below. Societal progress is not linear: It is a whirlwind, and the project's gender champions remain resolute, knowing that, if change were easy to effect, gender parity would likely already exist.

Cameroon – Laurence Wete Soh, FODER

As elsewhere, the issue of gender did not occupy much space in Cameroonian civil society; organisations focused mostly on the particular battles in their fields of action without paying too much mind to the immense silent combat being waged daily at the global level.

“Our organisation didn't have a gender policy, we didn't know that it was important to have one,” says Laurence Wete Soh, CV4C project manager at *Forêts et Développement rurale* (FODER). This was perhaps less urgent in the particular case of FODER, an organisation that emphasises the notions of equity and inclusion in general. “Intuitively, FODER already had a tendency towards gender parity, including in our IM teams, which were balanced.”



But once the CV4C project highlighted the need to incorporate gender issues strategically, FODER wanted to be counted in. Wete Soh explains, “We've developed a gender policy, and revised our strategic tools and our internal documents to explicitly and formally integrate gender issues so as to ensure lasting equality of opportunities for men and women, within the organisation and in our interventions” – concrete gains that cannot be easily undone by future changes in management.

FODER wanted other groups to benefit from the training given by Mary Nyuyinwi, concentrating on the Coordination of external independent monitors and about half a dozen organisations using the quality management procedures of the Standardized External Independent Observation System (SNOIE) developed around the international standard ISO 9001: 2015.

“**Once you've seen the importance, you don't stop seeing it.**” FODER has set up a communication and awareness-raising plan, and shared gender responsiveness tools and approaches among its peers in civil society. The organisation has explored and published resources on various issues related to the forestry sector: challenges specific to IM with regard to gender mainstreaming, opportunities to be seized in the forestry sector in Cameroon, or integration of gender in the sustainable management of forest resources. FODER has also shone a light on issues of societal importance, such as the impact of palm oil plantations on women, the violence suffered by women and the loss of access to arable land engendered by these plantations.

“Before, it was strategically difficult for civil society to be able to provide information on cross-cutting subjects. Yet now almost all organisations integrate gender into project management and into the tools they use on a daily basis, from the design phase through to implementation, so in the immediate term an obvious capability was generated by the project,” says Wete Soh. “For example, on a practical level, the involvement of women in community IM has improved. Before, there were very few women” – meaning ≈ 0 – “but now we are seeing more and more of them.”

“Once you’ve seen the importance [of gender responsiveness], you don’t stop seeing it.”

As their forestry teams were already integrated, FODER prioritised taking into account the needs of women in rural communities and among Indigenous Peoples. Within these vulnerable groups are groups that are still more vulnerable: among others, women.

“Until then we had focused on enforcement of forest law, but we wanted to integrate women’s needs, and to document their interests as well as the impact on their conditions, and way of life, to be able to address them through IM.”

Problem: It is one thing to monitor, and another to build advocacy or direct action, given that forestry legislation in Cameroon is strictly gender neutral; the same law exists for everyone. (It should be noted that the [VPA-FLEGT between Cameroon and the European Union](#) that entered into force in 2011, also does not include mention either of the word ‘gender’ or ‘woman’.) “Theoretically, harm to the individual has no gender,” says Wete Soh.

If only reality would follow the theory. “This fails to take into account the actual situation of rural women and their essential role in the management of forest resources and to meet their family’s vital needs. This policy neutrality has repercussions in the official collection of data, the application of forest regulations and the use of evidence for advocacy.

“When an infringement occurs, everyone is disadvantaged – but women even more so, because they are the ones who benefit from or who are responsible for providing forests services: water, food for the family, non-timber forest products (NTFPs) – a source of additional income. That the legislation does not account for this harm to their way of life is problematic.”

But where there’s an obstacle, there’s determination to get around it. FODER supports women in rural areas, directly and by [supporting the organisation of active rural women \(OFERA\)](#). On occasion, a very small change can help overcome this neutrality: Until 2017, project results were presented in a unisex fashion, but simply noting ‘Mr.’ or ‘Ms.’ on an attendance list at a stakeholder meeting can help track trends in women’s participation.

The FODER team is aiming bigger, however. To have a broader and more equitable impact on equity, [FODER and other Cameroonian NGOs](#) would like to influence the revision of the forest law initiated in 2008, as well as the process to revise the legality grids of the FLEGT-VPA, to integrate the needs and interests of women. They remain engaged.

Interview with Laurence Wete Soh, 8 December 2020

Central African Republic – Norma Guitinzia, CIEDD

The Central African Republic (CAR) was an early leader of the CV4C project’s gender sensitivity engagement. Beyond IM, awareness of the situation of women and the benefits of their involvement in the development of public and private initiatives seemed to be on track during the early phases of the CV4C project.

“The government quickly discovered that the [integration of women could be a game-changer](#), not just in the forest sector but also in improving the implementation of sustainable development and of other policies that closely involve women,” says Norma Guitinzia, gender focal point



GDRNE platform gender strategy workshop

for CV4C at the Centre for Environmental Information and Development (CIEDD), CV4C partner. “Before CV4C, similar initiatives existed, but they were not really taken into account.”

A branch within the Ministry of the Environment (MEFCP), the National Climate Coordination (CNC), got wind of the preliminary gender work carried out by CV4C, called on CIEDD for training and even invited parliamentarians from the Central African Commission on Production and Natural Resources to participate. “Thanks to the CV4C project, we carried out gender training for the prime minister’s office in order to incorporate gender into their internal programmes,” Guitinzia explains.

“It was as though they’d studied in the top universities, there was so much potential!”

Political will existed. The Ministry of the Environment, for example, invited Guitinzia to join the Central African delegation as a gender expert for the international conference on the Blue Economy in 2018 in Kenya.

As for forest policy, Guitinzia participated in European research on community forestry and women in the Congo Basin, initiated by the NGO Fern during which she was dazzled by the expertise of the Indigenous women consulted, their knowledge of processes and programmes and the arguments they put forward. “It was as though they’d studied in the top universities, there was so much potential!”

Gender responsiveness had taken centre-stage, and then ... nothing. Enthusiasm fizzled.

“Women have seen themselves headed backward instead of progressing – even in government, where the number of elected women is thin on the ground. And this is also the case in civil society where women are less present,” says Guitinzia.



CIEDD time management training

“2018 was a pivotal year, a year of ‘fat cows’, plentiful times; we thought real change would occur. But perhaps because of the economic situation, competition has now become very, very tough and many men seem to be retreating on the issue – then women’s concerns are pushed aside, and most prefer to give up rather than capsize the boat. Even among women working in the forest sector, very few speak up.” The COVID-19 pandemic seems to have accentuated this trend.

Guitinzia explains that, since 2016 in CAR, a law on gender parity has existed, “Its terms are clear enough to be directly applicable, but some have argued that implementing rules are needed; application of the law has become stuck in a nebula of politics ... and that’s where everything stops. And if there is no application, people will not fully integrate gender parity.

“In terms of governance, things seem bleak but they aren’t hopeless. At CIEDD, we take a broader approach. We have male teammates who value our skills – that is important, because defending women also comes down to our brothers, our sons, our friends.”

The road ahead may be long, but Guitinzia does not allow herself to be discouraged. She considers that, perhaps, the women who continue to raise their heads above the parapet are precisely the ones who are needed, those who have iron-clad determination and who will continue to avail themselves of the CV4C awareness tools so that the women are accepted and recognised as a cornerstone of forest governance. 250 women of this calibre are currently running in the legislative elections scheduled for 27 December 2020, a hundred more than in 2015, and hope to effect change. “We never back down unless to better leap forward.”

Interview with Norma Guitinzia, 1 December 2020

Democratic Republic of Congo – Igerha Bampa, OGF

Igerha Bampa, agricultural engineer at the Observatoire de la Gouvernance Forestière (OGF) in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), is one of the few women to work in Independent Forest Monitoring (IM), yet at the start of the CV4C project, even she did not have the tools to raise awareness about taking gender into account in IM. Following training by Mary Surridge and Mary Nyuyinwi (above), she acquired the basics of gender awareness needed to enable other civil society organisations in platforms involved with forest monitoring to incorporate it.

Bampa targeted three fora: Climate Working Group REDD - Renové (GTCRR), a platform working on REDD+ in the DRC; the Coalition of Civil Society Actors Fighting against Illegal Exploitation of Forests (CALF), monitoring the FLEGT process; and the Coalition of Women Leaders for the Environment and Sustainable Development (CFLEDD). All organisations recognised the need to strengthen their gender responsiveness capacities; none had a strategy. Through the first trainings with Nyuyinwi and a gender audit conducted at the local level to identify the expectations of the partner platforms, Bampa was able to define concretely what to focus on with the different organisations.

Several stumbling blocks emerged, beginning with the insufficient number of women working in forestry and the difficulty in locating women experts. At OGF, for example, for more than five years Bampa had been the only female forester on the team. OGF made a point of recruiting others. Thanks to the collaboration of the World Resources Institute, a CV4C partner that manages the Open Timber Portal (OTP), OGF succeeded in adding a woman lawyer to the technical team that goes on missions. Two women also joined OGF's financial team. Nonetheless, an initial necessity was obviously to discover "the trick to increasing the number of women working in the sector".

OGF is the only IM organisation mandated by the DRC to support the forest administration in joint forest monitoring missions. As a result, OGF were well placed to note that the administration's teams were still decidedly male.

"That was one of the hurdles we couldn't get over," says Bampa. "During the discussions in preparation for field missions, we suggested they take the opportunity to mix their teams. We sent a letter to this effect, but received no official response." Bampa tries to find consolation, "The good thing is that when it comes to collecting information, they turn also to women."



During a forest governance workshop, participants express themselves on the priorities of men and of women.

Before we limited ourselves to what the regulatory texts provide; now we push beyond to examine the impact of these texts on life in the communities.

But a vicious circle becomes apparent: Forestry missions remain predominantly composed of men, and both the administration and non-mandated independent monitors invoke the barrier of 'constraints on the ground' to justify this. The exception is the CFLEDD platform – which, let us remember, is a coalition of *women* – which is criticised for discrimination ... given the insignificant number of male members of the coalition.

The knock-on effect is considerable. As they do not participate in missions, women lack experience in the field, making them less sought after when hiring. Seeing that Bampa succeeded in participating in the field missions, some women, members of the corps of forest inspectors, approached her to ask for advice, a tip, some kind of opening. "They hoped that I could act as a lever, but I had to let them know that OGF had already sent a letter to the Ministry, which was unsuccessful."

Bampa also blames the slowdown in the integration of women in the IM sector on the financial stakes. Somewhere the attitude persists, especially in economically difficult times, "that normally women have a husband, and already an income coming from him, and therefore men must be given more opportunities. Women do not have the right to claim a salary as well".

Bampa continues, "We disagree. If they are qualified, single or not, women should have the same opportunity to continue their professional training, especially so that the young can learn the profession of forest inspector.



OGF, and agents of the provincial and central government meet with the timber company representative during a joint mission in Équateur, DRC.

When the director of the Ministry of the Environment was a woman, she gave women the same opportunities as men. Not anymore: Now it's always the same people on mission, the seasoned ones who already know the job."

Even if the hiring of women in IM remains, for now, at a low ebb, the CV4C project has shown a path, and leaves behind fundamental tools for advancement.

"Gender issues had never been a priority in independent monitoring before the CV4C project. We managed to finalise several gender-strategy documents, and carried out associated activities during the four years of the project."

For Bampa, two CV4C trainings are particularly strategic: that of gender mainstreaming in the project cycle, and a broader CV4C training on assistance in fundraising. "If we're already looking for money to fund forest monitoring, we can easily add in gender issues – it's just a matter of thinking of it."

Bampa sees opportunities to better reflect the gender aspects in the thematic forest governance notes issued by OGF, both through mandated IM and through the national network of non-mandated independent monitors (RENOI), an even broader audience.

"Now we note our observations through a 'gender lens', for example when monitoring the implementation of social clauses signed by logging companies with communities bordering forests. We note the gender situation as well, and when we dig deeper we see that, within a local community or an Indigenous group, there are marginalised people. Will all these small groups within these communities benefit in the same way from the local development fund paid by a forestry company? Before we limited ourselves to what the regulatory texts provide; now we push beyond to examine the impact of these texts on life in the communities, both within the framework of FLEGT and of REDD+, to help ensure that the policies developed are more equitable for vulnerable groups."

The CV4C project leaves behind a substantial legacy. Bampa sums up, "The great achievement lies in the tools we have developed with CV4C. The challenge is to apply them in our daily life. It's up to us to take it as seriously as it deserves, and to work on it."

Interview with Igerha Bampa, 8 December 2020

Please see "[Pulling Together](#)", the main article about the CV4C gender-responsiveness initiative.



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>.