



global witness

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Achievements and Lessons Learned from Independent Forest Monitoring (IFM) in Cameroon

During its nearly three years in Cameroon, Global Witness as the Independent Observer produced 123 field mission reports, three summary reports and the first-ever analysis of the official forestry information management system, SIGIF (Système Informatique de Gestion de l'Information Forestière), which contains all logging authorisation and production data. Both the Government and donors were updated on a regular basis about the activities of the Independent Observer, be it field missions, workshops, successes, difficulties and any other relevant information.

Below are some of the achievements and lessons learned from the project. They relate to the period of Global Witness' involvement in Cameroon and do not take into account any developments since then.

Improved professionalism and efficacy in forest law enforcement

Global Witness' work as the Independent Observer in Cameroon resulted in significant improvements in forest law enforcement. The Independent Observer worked alongside the Central Control Unit (CCU) in the field and liaised closely with the line ministry, MINEF. Relationships with the CCU, particularly at the early days of the project, were at times sensitive, but improved substantially through time and the CCU showed an increased commitment and will to report illegal logging activities and issue the relevant 'official statements of offence' (*procès verbal*).

The discipline and efficacy of the CCU increased and field missions were undertaken much more regularly at the end of the project than at the beginning. This resulted in a substantial decrease in the number of infractions observed in relation to the number of logging titles inspected, and an increase in official statements of offence issued when infractions were detected.

However, the Independent Observer did note a serious lack of coordination and information exchange between the CCU and those responsible for forest law enforcement in the provinces, which remained so throughout Global Witness' involvement in the project.

For more on these findings see our Third Summary Report, 2005, for a thorough analysis of the nature and occurrence of infractions.

Penalties for illegal logging

One effective use of the information documented by the Independent Observer was to demonstrate to Cameroonian officials the need for effective penalties for illegal logging activities. Despite over a hundred field mission reports, legal progress to bring to account those responsible - both individual infractors and those suspected of mis-managing the system of control - remained disappointingly slow.

In conjunction with the project, MINEF published a series of press statements detailing all infractions reported and sanctions imposed. The most recent analysis of these publications carried out by Global Witness, dated October 2004, revealed that a total of FCFA 4.15 billion (US\$7.5 million) had been levied, of which only FCFA 1.55 billion (US\$2.8 million), or 37% was reported as paid.

The biggest continuing challenge for MINEF and other government agencies is the continuing inertia in pursuing litigation cases and in imposing the appropriate penalties. The opaque nature of the calculations made to determine the level of damages needs further investigation in order to understand and overcome the apparent constraints on making this a simple formulaic system. Furthermore, the time taken to pay penalties and the opportunities to negotiate alternative settlements undermine their purpose as a deterrent to other potential infractors.

Finally, despite an institutional mechanism designed to facilitate cooperation, the Independent Observer noted insufficient exchange of information between MINEF and the Ministry of Finance with regards to recovery of taxes and illegal logging.

Public Accountability and Awareness

Despite an organised, well-informed and pro-active civil society, the Independent Observer noted that cooperation between local NGOs and MINEF was usually limited to occasional formal meetings. The Independent Observer recommended that monitoring of forest activities by attentive civilians would be a significant addition to law enforcement capacity. Villagers and NGOs provide an invaluable source of information about what is happening in the forests, from illegal logging to intimidations and breaches of rights.

Throughout the implementation of the project, information from civilians led to the Independent Observer documenting significant illegal logging cases. MINEF did not, however, capitalise on this source of information to support the law enforcement process, and its interaction with civil society remained weak. Moreover, often NGOs and village representatives contacted the Independent Observer after encountering resistance from the provincial or central MINEF officials. It is crucial that these groups be made better aware of their rights and of the legal processes involved in forest management.

Civil society rights

The current Cameroonian Forest Law dates from 1994 and since then a number of concerns have been raised by civil society. At the time Global Witness ceased operating in Cameroon, there remained serious questions regarding enforcement ability, procedural inconsistencies, lack of clarity in control processes, and the validity of the concession allocation system itself.

There were a number of cases where logging titles have been allocated without due regard for community rights, and against legal provisions, despite there being a decree (issued in December 2001) giving local communities a voice in the development of community forests.

Furthermore, villagers protesting against illegal logging in their areas had no real means to ensure their rights are respected, and were often frustrated by the collusion of forest officials with the private sector. When they tried to claim their rights, they were often faced with intimidation.

The presence of the Independent Observer triggered a significant increase in law enforcement. In-depth independent documentation combined with the constant presence of the Independent Observer curbed some corruption amongst officials, and civil society regularly used the Independent Observer as a mouthpiece to voice their concerns.

Meeting new challenges

In our third and final Summary Report, analysis of the infractions the Independent Observer observed revealed that the nature of offences was shifting. For example, out-of-boundary logging was decreasing, while logging undersized stems and logging over the allowed volume within boundaries remained substantial. At the same time, fraudulent timber removal and illegal logging in Community Forests was becoming more serious.

As awareness of these shifting trends grows, it is essential that control activities follow suit to address this, as illegality is likely to continue becoming more sophisticated in the future.

The future of Independent Forest Monitoring in Cameroon under threat

The next phase of the project was secured through the launch of an international bidding process in May 2004, to which Global Witness and another ten organisations were invited to bid. This phase was funded by the EU and began in April 2005.

After careful consideration, Global Witness reached the decision not to bid, as did another nine invitees. We based this decision on two reasons: first, the three year budget would have not allowed Global Witness to provide the service to a consistent level with the work we had done previously. This typically incurred a cost about 30% higher than that offered by the EU (by comparison, the fines the Government of Cameroon has levied during the time Global Witness has operated as the Independent Observer were enough to run an IFM project for 15 years!).

Secondly, and even more worryingly, the Terms of Reference (ToR) for the new phase of the project substantially undermined the independence of the monitor and hence the ability of the project to remain effective is at serious risk. Global Witness commissioned a detailed comparison between the various Terms of Reference different monitors have operated under, in Cameroon and Cambodia, available on our website.