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Governing independent monitoring: from theory to practice

Mbzibain, Aurelian

2023-12

Mbzibain, A, Niyrenda, R, Wete Soh, L & Kengoum Djiigni, F 2023, Governing independent monitoring: from theory to practice. in S Ongolo & M Krott (eds), Power dynamics in African forests : The politics of sustainability. Routledge, Taylor & Francis, pp. 109-131. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003363636>

<http://hdl.handle.net/10138/568287>
10.4324/978100336363101

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5 Governing Independent Forest Monitoring from Theory to Empirical Evidence in the Congo Basin

Aurelian Mbzibain, Richard Nyirenda, Laurence Wete Sob and Felicien Kengoum

5.1. Introduction

Tropical forests are host to the world's most important territorial biodiversity and play a significant role in mitigating global climate change and contributing to soil and water conservation (Mulata et al., 2017). In addition, these forests provide many other vital resources and habitats for forest-dependent people such as provision of arable lands, non-timber forest products, wood fuel, medicine, religious and cultural sites. As a result of climate change and biodiversity concerns, tropical deforestation, in particular how to combat illegal extraction, is now a major priority on the global policy agenda (Burgess et al., 2012). The Glasgow Leaders' Declaration on Forests and Land Use at COP 26 (UK COP26, 2021a), reiterated the urgency of protecting these forests and halting the damaging land use, as one of the most important actions required to fight climate change (Humphreys, 2008) while securing the livelihoods of the 1.6 billion people globally. The Congo Basin hosts the second-largest tropical rainforest in the world which is threatened by industrial logging, mining, and agriculture. Despite decades of international, regional, and domestic policy initiatives, ongoing resource deterioration continues to vex practitioners, as well as scholars of environmental governance and regulation (Cashore and Stone, 2014). Researchers have argued that the state-controlled model of forestry characterised by weak governance (Karsenty et al., 2008) and imperfect monitoring of forests and related land uses by bureaucrats and politicians with responsibility to control forest extraction is to blame (Newell, 2008). In the future, if global policy initiatives like the global finance pledge and the Congo Basin Fund (UK COP26, 2021b) are going to help, understanding why illegal extraction is often sanctioned or facilitated remains central to countering tropical deforestation (Cashore and Stone, 2014).

The failure of the exclusive or unilateral state-controlled model of forest management led to calls for new governance models, which include stronger roles for markets and networks in addressing the problems of forest illegality. These new models include forest certification, legality verification/assurance systems, Forest Law Enforcement, Governance and Trade (FLEGT) licences and IFM among

DOI: 10.4324/9781003363101-6

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others (Bäckstrand et al., 2010; Mbzibain and Ongolo, 2019). Others predicted the withdrawal of the state or the “hollowing out of the state”, arguing that a stronger role of the private sector and civil society would lead to better forest and environmental outcomes, but this has not borne out in practice (Pulhin and Dressler, 2009) as evidenced by the continuous increase in forest illegality globally and in the Congo Basin (CB). Paradoxically, Carodenuto and Ramcilovic-Suominen (2014) argue that the problem of illegality remains difficult to resolve because of the complexity of actors involved and complicated political economy issues.

Box 5.1 Brief history of independent forest monitoring in the Congo Basin

Independent forest monitoring (IFM) entails a third-party assessment of the conformity of forest management and forestry activities with the legislative and regulatory standards in force in the forestry sector of the country. Early IFM initiatives were centred on a formal service contract between an official “host institution” and an international non-governmental organisation (NGO). Field investigations tended to look at forest operations more than fraud or systemic problems, and the monitor’s terms of reference typically included observing how the state forest law officials conducted their own work. The majority of current initiatives are led by national or local civil society organisations (CSOs) or environmental associations and do not start from a partnership with an official host institution. It’s common to have many monitors in a single country, and monitoring compliance with the social obligations of concessionaires is increasingly included in the scope of work. IFM was introduced in the CB under pressure from international donors in a context characterised by corruption, poor legal compliance (Fométié and Cerutti, 2008), and systemic mistrust between donors and recipient governments in forest management.

Source: adapted from Mbzibain and Ongolo (2019)

As shown in Box 5.1, Global Witness introduced IFM to the Congo Basin in 2000, followed by other international NGOs, expanding its scope to the Republic of Congo and Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) by 2012. In other countries such as the Central African Republic (CAR) and Gabon, IFM has been introduced primarily through FLEGT voluntary partnership agreements (FLEGT VPAs) with the European Union. The EU 2003 Action Plan recognised from the beginning the need for independent monitoring of the systems the VPA was designed to establish stating that “*transparency is also helped by the involvement of independent monitoring and auditing of systems to verify the legality of timber in producing countries. Independent monitoring makes verification systems more credible and less prone to corruption*” (European Commission, 2003). The EU saw IFM mainly as a tool to ensure the effectiveness and credibility of the licensing scheme by introducing a third party to monitor and report on its implementation (EU, 2005).

The note stressed that the role of the independent monitor did not include reporting on forest crime, but rather that it was “observation and reporting on verification of legality of forest operations” (Brack and Leger, 2013). International advocacy NGOs argued that in a context of weak governance where corruption is rife and political support for the elimination of illegal logging is minimal, IFM needed to extend to all areas of forest management including detection of forest crimes, auditing of government performance, policy development, and implementation (Brown and Tucker, 2006). The retreat of international NGOs from this space around 2013, led to the emergence of various forms of IFM implemented by local NGOs. There are two main types of IFM, mandated and non-mandated IFM or external IFM, monitoring forest management related issues beyond forest concessions including, social agreements, benefit sharing, rights, procurement processes, and so on.

Under mandated IFM, a national civil society organisation negotiates a contract with the government to implement forest monitoring in support of the official government control function carried out by national forest control brigades (Congo, DRC, and CAR). With non-mandated or external IFM, a civil society organisation operates without an agreement or mandate from the government and therefore has greater autonomy in setting monitoring goals. For a more detailed description of advantages and disadvantages of both types, see Brack and Leger (2013). In all countries, mandated IFM organisations now operate alongside non-mandated IFM organisations with varying levels of collaboration between the organisations.

Figure 5.1 shows the evolution of both mandated and non-mandated IFM in Congo Basin countries starting in 2000 to 2017, when mandated IFM was officially launched in CAR led by a national NGO.

5.2. Governance and political economy analysis framework

In this chapter, we focus on independent forest monitoring as a new governance mode and discuss the underlying factors affecting its effectiveness through a governance and political economy analysis (GPEA) perspective (Fritz et al., 2009). Political economy analysis (PEA) is a powerful tool which “*focuses on how power and resources are distributed and contested in different contexts, and the implications for development outcomes. It gets beneath the formal structures to reveal the underlying interests, incentives and institutions that enable or frustrate change*” (DFID, 2009). Others propose unpacking the extent to which context and structural factors, bargaining processes, stakeholders and their interests and incentives facilitate or impede change (Whites, 2017). The application of PEA to forest governance initiatives is obviously not new (McDermott and Sotirov, 2018). Forestry can be at best characterised as a branch in which markets and politics are tightly entangled (Deegen, 2019; Deegen et al., 2019). As Wagner (2019) posits, modern forestry is replete with interactions among commercial and political entities and is hence ripe for exploration by examining it through political economy lenses. This approach is well suited to contexts such as those in the Congo Basin

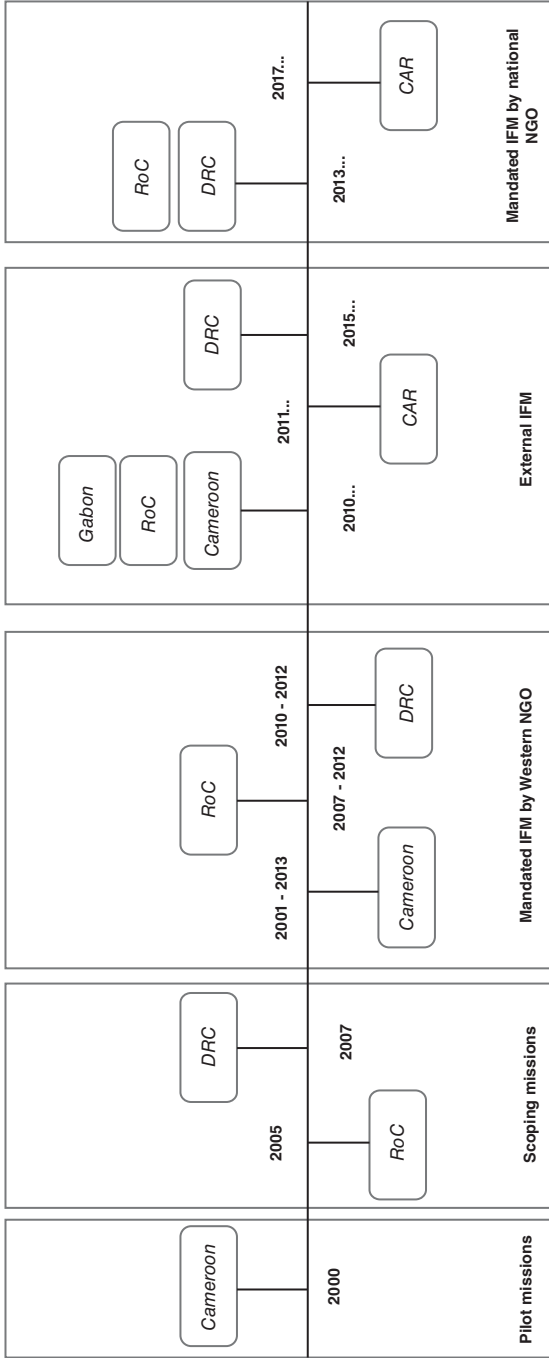


Figure 5.1 IFM Timeline in the Congo Basin
Source: Wete & Moumpen, 2021

which are characterised by weak state structures and intertwined power and business privileges (Newell, 2008).

According to Dkamela et al. (2014), a PEA lens can enable a deeper understanding of the factors likely to facilitate or hinder attempts to mitigate the main drivers of deforestation and forest degradation. With the very strong role donors have played (and continue to play) in the promotion of IFM, PEA could also highlight the tensions that can arise between values and objectives of donors and the need to build on local institutions and engage with the interests of politically powerful actors (DEVCO, 2013). While acknowledging the diversity of political economy theories, one of our contributions in this chapter is by applying the GPEA framework to IFM. Drawing from Fritz et al. (2009), DFID (2009), and Devco (2013), “*The framework emphasises that the analysis focuses on particular problems, challenges, or opportunities ... analysing why reforms have repeatedly stalled or have failed and what could be done differently to move forward*”. Fritz et al. (2009) propose that implementing a governance and political economy analysis of an issue or sector of interest requires identifying the problem, opportunity, or vulnerability to be addressed, mapping out the institutional arrangements and the political economy drivers. In line with Fritz et al., we emphasise the role *institutional variables* (laws and regulations, as well as informal rules) and *political economy drivers* following analysis of the successes and challenges facing IFM. The analysis of the drivers focuses on actors and stakeholders, their interests, and the ways in which they interact with formal and informal institutions in order to understand and explain their motivations.

Regarding the *problem analysis*, in light of the emergence of different forms of IFM and national and local actors involved, the question of effectiveness becomes increasingly important because of concerns from donors, practitioners, and policy makers interested in the subject. We first address what IFM has achieved so far through a legitimacy perspective (Kronsell and Bäckstrand, 2010) and then address the challenges faced by IFM organisations in their role. Kronsell and Bäckstrand identify two forms of legitimacy – democratic legitimacy to do with elections, hierarchical forms, and administrative rationality, and normative legitimacy derived from norms and values such as such as accountability, transparency, inclusion, and deliberation. We focus on normative legitimacy which has two dimensions relevant for this analysis: input (or procedural) legitimacy and output legitimacy. Input (procedural) legitimacy derives from procedural logic and explores how transparent, fair, inclusive, accountable, and voice-based spaces are provided by IFM. Output legitimacy focuses on the outcomes of IFM in terms contributions to policy, institutional, compliance, and environmental solutions to wicked problems¹.

In analysing *institutional structures*, we focus on the formal and informal rules, which influence behaviour of actors through coercive, normative, and mimetic pressures (Spenser and Gomez, 2004). Coercive pressures manifest themselves through regulation, legislation, and industry standards and guidelines (Majid et al., 2020). Mimetic pressures influence organisational/individual behaviour through the need to imitate best practices or benchmark best performing actors (Majid et al., 2020). It is argued that organisations will follow leading organisations or those

with whom they share similarities, which have secured and demonstrated the benefits from adopting a particular behaviour (Alziady and Enayah, 2019). Normative pressures influence behaviour through widely shared knowledge about how particular behaviours are categorised and interpreted within society (Kostova and Roth, 2002). These pressures manifest themselves through social pressures on organisations and their members to conform to certain norms resulting from increased professionalisation and business standards. Key components of these pressures include educational, advisory, and training systems, which provide the skills and information required to adopt positive environmental behaviours (Spenser and Gomez, 2004). Different from coercive pressures, mimetic and normative pressures do not have authority to enforce compliance or non-compliance.

Finally, as part of the *political economy* drivers, we focus on the identification of stakeholders, to map their roles and interests and the interactions between actors. *Actors or stakeholders* comprise individuals as well as organised groups or groups with shared or divergent interests, business associations, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), traditional associations, and government and private sector actors in a particular region. In this specific regard, we build on stakeholder's typology from Mitchel, Agle, and Wood (1997) who distinguish between three attributes (power, legitimacy, and urgency) to determine eight qualitative classes of stakeholders.

The following section presents the results and discussions drawing on the conceptual framework. First, we present the effectiveness of IFM as a forest governance tool, drawing on the concepts of input and output legitimacy followed by the problems faced. The next section addresses the institutional environment characterised by the coercive, mimetic, and normative pressures, which influence the behaviour of actors and stakeholders. The results and discussion section ends with an analysis of the actors, their roles, and interests and how they interact with each other.

5.3. Results and discussion

Contribution of IFM to improving forest governance

IFM sits at the heart of deliberative processes aimed at increasing transparency and accountability within the forest sector in several ways. While IFM implementation predates FLEGT-VPA processes, such as Cameroon; in the rest of the Congo basin, IFM has been strongly linked to the FLEGT-VPA process. All the VPAs contain commitments to transparency, in the form of an annex listing the information, which should be made public (Brack and Léger, 2013). IFM offers the opportunity for civil society and marginalised indigenous peoples and local communities to participate in forest, law enforcement, governance, and trade by generating evidence of non-compliance with forest sector rules by stakeholders. In Cameroon for instance, a network of local NGOs organised under the SNOIE brand partnered with Rainforest Foundation UK to implement a real time community monitoring system that enabled communities to identify and alert NGOs and authorities of perceived illegalities within their communities. As a result of the

use of quality management systems and certification practices (as part of SNOIE), as well as a deliberative approach, this reportedly led to increased joint missions with forest administration, fines, and sanctions imposed on private companies and government officials engaged in alleged illegalities. In DRC, the creation of a national network of external monitoring organisations increased participation, the level of information, and transparency in the forest sector through regular joint field missions with the forestry administration and organisation of communication outreach activities to inform the public and policy makers about forest illegality (CIDT, 2021a).

There is no doubt that increasing transparency and information about the forest sector does not necessarily result in increased compliance, environmental outcomes, or influence improvements to current policies. To achieve these additional benefits, IFM organisations have to go beyond dissemination of information to engaging with other external actors. For instance in Gabon, IFM provides the space for communities to voice their concerns regarding access to benefits from forest exploitation. Using IFM reports, the local NGO organisation, Brainforest, brought cases to court against forest exploitation companies and won. For the first time, companies were held accountable for their actions (CIDT, 2021b). The companies were ordered to pay everything owed to the communities from 2014 to 2018 – a total of USD 215,970. In the Republic of Congo, the independent member (IM) organisation CAGDF worked out the overall indebtedness of all forestry companies established on Congolese territory in 2018. It was revealed in the report that up to 13 million USD in taxes had not been collected, which is 50 per cent of what the state was supposed to collect. As for fines, 1.8 million USD has been paid to the state, a meagre 21 per cent of the amount owed. By drawing attention and calling for accountability, in the months that followed, the CAGDF team noted a considerable effort by government officials to improve the collection of monies owed (CIDT, 2021c). Similarly in CAR, for the first time, IFM organisations organised joint missions with the forest administration leading to historical cases of illegality revealed and companies sanctioned (CIDT, 2021d). These cases support the view by Gibson et al. (2005) that regardless of levels of social capital, formal organisation or forest dependence, regular monitoring and sanctioning could contribute to better forest outcomes.

Challenges faced by IFM

As shown in Figure 5.1, independent monitoring of forest activities by national civil society organisations is at very different stages of development in the Congo Basin. In Cameroon, official mandated IFM projects ended in 2013 and since then CS has struggled to monitor the sector, due to the limited number of actors and largely due to lack of resources. In the DRC, Observatoire de la Gouvernance Forestière (OGF) took on the role of mandated forest monitors from resource extraction monitoring (REM) in 2014, but its effectiveness has been limited by the government's failure to take recommendations seriously. In Gabon, two local NGOs, Brainforest and Conservation Justice have been at the forefront of IFM.

There remains a significant lack of appreciation and acceptance of IFM amongst decision-makers in the country. As in other countries, the IFM in CAR is characterised by significantly weak technical capacity and limited uptake of IFM findings by forest authorities. In all of the five Congo Basin countries, findings are not readily taken into account by the private sector, lawmakers, anti-corruption committees, and the justice system. Many donors and practitioners are concerned that NGO IFM network initiatives in the Congo Basin are producing disappointing results. To some authors, civil society has not been particularly effective in assuming their role (Mbzibain and Ongolo, 2019).

Vallee et al. (2022) reveal further government delays in the publication of mandated IFM reports, conflicts of interests within government agencies, which exacerbate political resistance and access to information. They further argue that the IFM's lack of visibility in the market limits its potential to influence market actors. While local IFM organisations continue to develop technical capacity, their organisational viability remains a concern due to lack of leadership, sustainable funding, credibility and limited adoption of modern technologies and quality management systems (Mbzibain and Ongolo, 2019). The levels of sanction and enforcement of recommendations from IFM across the Congo Basin remain extremely low and far between. As IFM organisations have more control over input/procedural contributions than output effectiveness; whereby, they must leverage other actors to achieve these additional gains, IFM organisations demonstrate limited capacity to manage fluid relationships with state and other IFM stakeholders for lack of advocacy and influencing strategies (Mbzibain and Nkuintchua, 2021).

Recently, Bollen (2020) identified a disconnect between local NGOs implementing IFM and wider civil society advocacy networks. The explosion of approaches and areas of intervention of IFM in the Congo Basin have further fragmented efforts leading to little coordination amongst civil society actors (EU, 2020). According to the Foreign Commonwealth & Development Office (FCDO), lack of coordination between international capacity building NGOs maybe a factor (FGMC, 2021) while some international non-governmental organisation (INGO) actors argue that too much focus has been placed on the technical aspects of IFM to the detriment of addressing the underlying reasons behind limited adoption². They opine that local NGOs may not be the best adapted to carry out IFM, suggesting that they are best suited for local advocacy while IFM is better implemented by international organisations. Between these actors, there is little agreement of what constitutes effective IFM. McDermott and Sotirov (2018) have shown that legality verification mechanisms are more likely to be adopted/respected where there is stronger civil society.

Coercion, mimetic, and normative pressures affecting IFM

In the Congo Basin, IFM operates within dense institutional and regulatory pressures resulting from government commitments to sustainable forest management. Partly driven by donor conditionality under the “good governance” agenda, Congo basin countries also sought to align with the implementation of Rio 1992 conference principles, which had significant influence in the development of forest

policies in the Congo Basin. A key tenet of these forest policies includes the need for stronger participation from non-state actors (Government of Cameroon, 1993; Government of Congo, 2014; Government of the DRC, 2020) while decentralisation of forest management was seen as a determining tool to boost local communities and citizens' participation in forest. IFM was thus structured and promoted as a tool for participatory forest management and for forest governance improvement (Young, 2007; Hoare et al., 2020).

CB states have participated in several international mechanisms on climate, forest governance, and nature conservation since the 1990s when the Kyoto Protocol was adopted. This is the case of the FLEGT VPA between the EU and three CB countries between 2010 and 2011³. FLEGT VPA emerged from the global Forest Law Enforcement and Governance movement led by the World Bank (WB) in the early 2000s to which Asian, African, and European states joined in 2001 and 2003 (Andong and Ongolo, 2020). CB countries are also party to the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) and most have developed their Nationally Determined Contributions (NDC) and REDD+ strategies to stem deforestation and forest degradation. All these policy engagements promote the role of civil society to improve transparency as part of monitoring, verification, and reporting systems. However, because of perceived fatigue of international processes caused by bottlenecks and delays in delivering key results, the role of civil society is undermined by forestry administrations (Carodenuto and Ramcilovic-Suominen, 2014).

For instance, the VPAs recognised the role of IFM as a transparency and legality assurance system (TLAS) tool (Brack and Léger, 2013). As an example, the Annexes IX of the EU-Republic of Congo and of the EU-CAR FLEGT VPAs identify civil society led IFM as tool to strengthen legal compliance and CSO participation in forest management. In Cameroon's FLEGT VPA, IFM is recognised in Annex VI as an information source to the work of Independent Auditor of the LAS. In CAR and DRC, the FLEGT VPAs have either been in a state of stagnation or have stopped completely. In other countries, years of investments have not delivered any operational TLAS or licensing system. In the absence of these systems, there is limited uptake of IFM findings by forest authorities and the private sector, and the very role of civil society in monitoring is still contested. Other VPA implementation agencies such as the joint implementation (JICS) and monitoring committees have largely been ceremonial without any enforcement powers. Though all JICs have the responsibility of considering complaints from VPA actors, the performance of these mechanisms remains to be seen (Satyal, 2018).

In addition, without an effective licensing or TLAS systems, IFM cannot contribute effectively to national law enforcement, thus limiting its potential. What emerges is the fact that local governments appear to be willing to allow local IFM organisations to operate because of IFM's historical focus on government mechanisms or procedures and the need to demonstrate to external actors that they are open to third-party monitoring (Cashore and Stone, 2014). Where IFM reports have been critical of government action and exposed government illegality and hence challenged sovereignty positions, governments in the Congo Basin have

tended to engage on rivalrous relationships with these organisations (Mbzibain and Nkuintchua, 2021). NGOs are accused of being instrumentalised by external activist organisations and donors (Brown and Tucker, 2006). This is not surprising according to Brown and Tucker (2006) who argue that even if NGOs try to prove their independence, this is likely to be disregarded in contexts where decision-making is highly politicised or commercial pressures present an overwhelming constraint (Brown and Tucker, 2006). In the Congo Basin it is clear that monitoring operations have “teeth” only because of global/external policy engagements otherwise, they are extremely politically vulnerable (Brown, 2006).

McDermott and Sotirov (2018) and Cashore and Stone (2014) suggest that adoption/respect of legality verification is most likely where there are market incentives and interdependencies between market economies. The lack of market premium for legality compliance is reported to have a negative effect on the development of legality systems such as FLEGT licences and forest certification. The ineffectiveness of the EU Timber Regulation (EUTR) as a key tool in the fight against the sale of illegal timber has also led timber importing companies in Europe to operate illegally with total impunity (ATIBT, 2020a). The recent effort by the government of Cameroon to mandate the use of legal timber in public procurement (FAO, 2021) could provide an economic incentive for legality. Ministries of Forestry and Fauna (MINFOF), Public Works (MINTP) and Public Procurement (MINAMP) recently issued a joint decree⁴ making the purchase of legal timber mandatory in public procurement. All timber used in public works and supplies must now conform to a set of legal criteria and carry a certificate of legality and origin. IFM organisations could play a stronger role in identifying gaps and weaknesses in procurement processes and hence utilise the mandate to push for better respect of national legislation. The failure both to develop functional TLAS and effective EUTR enforcement is compounded by many other issues including the existence of weak judiciary, undemocratic governance, and corruption in timber producer countries (Mbzibain and Ongolo, 2019; Woolfrey, 2021) and lack of knowledge and enforcement capacity in EU member states (ATIBT, 2020a).

In Ghana and Indonesia, research identifies that the level of democratic governance and application of decentralised forest management is positively related to compliance with legality verification systems and their adoption (Lund et al., 2012). In the Congo Basin context, decentralisation is mainly shaped through the transfer of forest resources and benefits management to municipalities and local communities. As a result of these decentralisation principles CSOs, dependent communities and citizens are able to assert their right to monitor the legal compliance of forest decisions and activities, as well as to stop or denounce any attempt to obstruct their access to local development opportunities embedded in the decentralisation mechanisms. Researchers have argued that decentralisation of forest sector management has not succeeded because forest administrations have used it to reposition themselves and maintain control over forest resources (Ribot et al., 2006). This situation creates grey areas in terms of responsibility for forest control and law enforcement. For instance, IFM reports submitted to local forestry administrations are hardly acted upon. Evidence from Cameroon actually suggests that local forestry administrations may be using IFM reports to extort

payments from companies as opposed to sanctioning them for alleged illegalities (Mbzibain and Ongolo, 2019). According to recent evidence from Cameroon, officials collect over € 6 million in informal taxes each year with no intention to promote transparency, equity or accountability (Cerutti et al., 2013; Ongolo and Karsenty, 2015). The stranglehold of the ministries of forests in this direction means that there is no interest to include traditional law enforcement agencies such as the police and judiciary. This situation perpetuates a vicious cycle of corruption and creates unintended effects from the viewpoint of IM organisations. In order to address these issues, IFM organisations have begun to engage with the judiciary with some success in Gabon and Cameroon. However, as Fritz et al. (2009) argue, countries with weak judiciaries will be unable to apply anti-corruption measures.

In addition to the coercive and regulatory pressures, IFM organisations operate in national contexts where mimetic pressures are arguably absent. Mimetic pressures influence organisational/individual behaviour through the need to imitate best practices or benchmark best performing actors (Majid et al., 2020). While timber associations such as the AITBT – a trade association representing the private tropical sector – appreciate the contribution of IFM to sustainable forest management, only a few companies are willing to state in public the benefits of IFM action to their organisation. For instance, a local company representative in CAR stated that the increased presence of IFM organisations in the field had pushed them to modify their practices, strengthening the implementation of social obligations and corporate social responsibility engagements⁵. With very few of these case studies shared among companies, it is unlikely that this behaviour will be imitated by other similar companies without regulatory enforcement. At the level of IFM organisations, mimetic pressures have led to significant improvements in the technical development and professionalisation of IFM in the region. With donor funding, a national civil society organisation (FODER Cameroon) introduced quality management systems and certification in the practice of IFM in the Congo Basin (Mbzibain and Nkuintchua, 2021). This is now being replicated throughout the Congo Basin including in the Republic of Congo and DRC. Civil society organisations and technical partners such as the Field Legality Advisory Group, FODER, and the Centre for International Development and Training of the University of Wolverhampton have started to develop standards and benchmarks for effective IFM. It is expected that as IFM organisations adopt these practices and increase their impact on the field, this could subsequently lead to better organisational outcomes in terms of recognition, funding, and acceptance but also their contribution to environmental outcomes.

In terms of normative pressures, trade associations and syndicates have a role to play in promoting good forest governance and possibly making IFM more effective. National timber trade associations in Cameroon (GFBC, 2021), the forest-timber interprofessional (GBFC, 2020); Union Des Forestiers Et Industriels Du Bois Du Gabon and the federation of timber processing companies (FIB) in DRC all have commitments to fight forest illegality in their countries, and to strengthen the ability of their members to act legally while representing their interests (ATIBT, 2022a, b). However, there is little evidence that they can sanction their

members when they are accused of illegalities. For instance, in DRC, FIB was keen to reject the report of Global Witness (Business & Human Rights Resource Centre, 2019a) on IFCO and COTREFOR (Business & Human Rights Resource Centre, 2019b), which claimed that these companies were selling illegal timber to the EU and Asian markets. In support, government officials argued that these companies were acting in all legality (Business & Human Rights Resource Centre, 2019c). The claims by the government official are that the directorate in charge of control and internal verification that regularly monitors forestry activities in DRC are not supported by mandated and non-mandated forest monitoring reports (CIDT, 2021a). This is not surprising in this context where political and economic interests are strongly intertwined (Majambu et al., 2021). The assumption here is that if national trade associations can rein in their members and strengthen their ability to respect the law, then they would be more accepting of IFM recommendations and will act on these to improve their practices. IFM organisations could tap into recent efforts by the GBFC in Cameroon, to strengthen the forest-timber interprofession while facilitating the ability of small and medium-sized enterprises to access legal timber through stronger partnership links with industrial timber companies. With funding support from the Food and Agriculture Organisation of the United Nations (FAO) – FAO-EU FLEGT programme – GBFC has been able to facilitate agreements with the Cameroonian Federation of Associations and Professionals in Secondary Wood Processing (Fecaprobois) and the Cooperative of Professionals in Secondary Wood Processing (Coop-CA Extraboicam). As more private sector actors understand their role and act to reduce forest illegality, it could create a stronger normative environment for citizens and consumers to demand legal timber for their products.

Normative pressures also emerge from the relationship between timber producers and their customers and clients. It is therefore expected that where the consumers are better informed about environmental impacts of timber-producing companies and their activities on the environment and indigenous communities, they would vote with their money through rejection of illegal products. While there is increasing evidence of the impact of increased environmental knowledge and awareness of consumers' behaviour in the West, there is scant evidence of this in the Congo Basin, where timber purchasing decisions are made mainly on price rather than on the environmental credentials of suppliers. In part, this is due to the weak purchasing power of households in the Congo Basin, but also to the fact that illegal products are more likely to be more affordable on the local market than legally sourced and processed products. As initiatives such as public procurement policies and those promoted by GBFC, Fecaprobois and Coop-CA EXTRA-BOICAM take root, more consumer demand pressures could help enhance the role of IFM if IM organisations are able to communicate their results to consumers, but IM organisations have so far ignored the domestic consumers in their actions. Actions to engage with competent authorities and western consumer markets have been scant (Nyirenda and Mbzibain, 2020).

Overall, this section shows that IFM organisations operate in a context of weak and fragmented regulatory, normative, and cognitive institutional environment, which

has limited its ability to achieve its full potential in terms of input and output legitimacy.

IFM and actors' interests in the Congo Basin

IFM in the Congo Basin countries has involved governmental agencies, forest companies, civil society organisations, local communities, technical and financial partners. Three attributes (power, legitimacy, and urgency) proposed by Mitchell et al. (1997) provide the basis to investigate who the actors of IFM in Cameroon are and thus understand their power relations in the policy arena. The IFM arena is a dynamic structure within which actors may shift from a category of stakeholder to another depending on structural or conjunctural circumstances (Kengoum, 2022). Table 5.1 and Table 5.2 highlight the roles and interests of stakeholders in

Table 5.1 Mapping of self-defined roles and interests in IFM by civil society actors of the IFM governance network

<i>Category of actor</i>	<i>Self-defined role</i>	<i>Interests and actions</i>
National NGOs	Watchdog, citizen control Advocacy for community rights Representation of forest-dependent communities Technical assistance to communities	Monitoring forest law enforcement and compliance of actors with national legislation, environment, and social norms
Transparency international	Advocacy	Organisation of verification missions and engagement with law enforcement agencies nationally and internationally
Communities	Informants Rights defenders	Improved benefits from forests Protection of livelihoods Preservation of resources
Media	Communication of IFM findings and studies	Increased transparency in forests
IFM coordination	Network management Facilitate network meetings Coordination with external actors	Rule setting, internal audits, and commissioning of external audits Effectiveness and efficiency of IFM function Visibility of IFM functions and network
Technical and financial partners	Technical and financial assistance	Objective, credible, and relevant information Credibility of national actors Improved forest governance including strengthened participation, transparency Viability of network functions

Source: Mbzibain and Ongolo (2019)

Table 5.2 Mapping of roles and interests of national and decentralised state authorities regarding IFM in Cameroon

<i>Category of actor and thematic focus</i>	<i>Role</i>	<i>Interests in IFM goals</i>
MINFOF – Forestry	Sovereign role – legal/forest owner Forest control and enforcement Coordination and facilitation of national level governance processes Traceability systems Attribution of rights Tax distribution and investments	Increased credibility of forest control function Increased transparency in the forest sector Increased incomes from forests Reduced forest illegality and related trade
MINADER – Agriculture and Rural Development	Formal administration in charge of agricultural development including granting of forest areas for agribusiness	Monitoring of allocated permits for agricultural development
MINJUSTICE – Justice and Law Enforcement	Application of national legal and penal code	Access to information about forest sector
MINAS – Social Affairs	Enforcement of social obligations of companies and community rights	Access to credible information in area of interest and enforcement of failures
MINEPDED – Environment	Environmental protection and conservation	Access to credible information in area of interest and enforcement of failures
MINTSS – Social Security	Workers’ rights and working conditions in forest companies	Access to credible information in area of interest and enforcement of failures
CONSUPE – Fighting Forest Crime	Forest-related financial crimes	Access to credible financial information on illegal forest exploitation activities.
National Human Rights Commission (NHRC) – human rights	Human rights of whistle-blowers, CSOs, and forest local communities	Access credible information in relation to IFM stakeholders’ rights violation.
Parliamentary Inquiry Commissions – accountability	Investigate administration and private corporate activities	Access all information they need in the area of interest of the ongoing investigation
Local councils and territorial administration – forestry and land use planning	Decentralised forest control Management of special forest development funds Local oversight of forest rights holders	Increased revenues from forests Local development
Independent auditor of the VPA – forest governance	Audit of the VPA system	Source of information and third-party verification Objective, credible and relevant information
CONAC – national anti-corruption agency – corruption	Fight against corruption	Access to credible information

Source: adapted from Mbzibain and Ongolo (2019) and Kengoum and Wete (2022)

Cameroon. Table 5.1 identifies the roles and interests of civil society actors involved in IFM.

Table 5.2 focuses on the roles and interests of state (national and local level) authorities regarding independent forest monitoring in Cameroon. State agencies generally act as “*dormant stakeholders*” as far as IFM is concerned given their statutory and sovereign role. They possess the power to impose but they don’t have the legitimate relationship or an urgent claim regarding the IFM. However, when needed, they can move into “*dominant stakeholders*” by raising the law to justify their legitimacy to act when they feel their interests are threatened. A state agency can use the law resources to protect its constituencies as observed in Cameroon where in a communique signed on 7 June 2015, the forestry administration formalised their collaboration with CSO organisations upon the signature of an MoU based on the submission of a set of documents, including a Letter of Intent. In DRC, Congo, and CAR where local IFM organisations are authorised by governments, they can only implement field missions with the authorisation from government. The same applies in the publication of IFM reports (Nyirenda and Mbzibain, 2020). In DRC for instance in 2018, the local NGO OGF could not carry out field missions for over eight months because of a disagreement with government on the lifting of a moratorium on forest concessions in the country. In CAR and Congo, governments hold on to reports for long periods of time, to the extent that the recommendations become redundant when the reports are ultimately published.

The primary objective of domestic and industrial timber producing companies in the Congo Basin is to maximise their profits and dividends to their shareholders. Private forest companies rely on administrative authorities to access rights to forests. Cerrutti and Tacconi (2006) report these are often through discretionary practices. Companies pay bribes to local authorities to appear powerful in front of local communities when it comes to avoiding complying with their external social obligations (Kengoum and Wete Soh, 2022). In some cases, they become “*dangerous stakeholders*”, by using violence against local communities when it comes to important stakes. Timber producing companies’ associations are key actors at all levels, representing and defending their interests on a national and regional level.

Most of the time, local communities whose livelihoods are threatened by poor governance are in the position of “*dependent stakeholders*” since they lack power but have urgent and legitimate claims they must rely on other actors to satisfy. This is most visible when it comes to claiming their rights to access resources or finances from the exploitation of forests in their area such as forests royalties. In some other cases, they are rather “*demanding stakeholders*”. As such they have urgent claims, but have neither legitimacy nor power to act. This happened in the case of riparian communities of the SOCAPALM in Cameroon. Their lands granted to the agro industry could not be claimed even though they were in an emergency situation of needing more land for their population that almost doubled after the two decades presence of SOCAPALM (Tene, 2022). Local communities also show that they are capable of bringing shifts into the paradigm, and adapt to new circumstances such as the use of technologies for IFM, and organise themselves into a

coherent network such as the SYNAPARCAM to challenge an important private sector company such as SOCAPALM. Moreover, with the support of CSOs, local communities have developed strategies to negotiate the realisation of their commitments by forest companies, by using non jurisdictional procedures. More specifically they implement community advocacy, relying on several categories of actors to achieve their objective (Beloune and Kengoum, 2022).

Civil society organisations involved in IFM in Congo Basin countries seem to fall into the category of “*discretionary stakeholders*” as they have the attribute of legitimacy, but lack power to directly influence the control of natural resources management, and cannot claim urgency since they are not directly the ones impacted by issues of IFM. In most cases they are not in a position of power nor in that of emergency. However, they benefit the legitimacy in front of States agencies, local communities, and the private companies since they are recognised by all other actors as representing certain interests. In Cameroon, the provisions of the article 11 of the 1996 environmental law are similar with those of article 134 of the DRC 2002 forest code, providing the legal framework for local communities and civil society actors to protect and defend their rights to forests and environmental resources. In all Congo Basin countries, IFM has always been implemented by CSOs organised into networks with facilitators such as FODER and FLAG in Cameroon, the RENOI-RDC in the DRC, Brainforest in Gabon, CIEDD in Central African Republic. The CSOs have shown innovation by developing new approaches to independent monitoring such as the SNOIE (Mbzibain and Ongolo, 2019), that involves actors from different categories to implement forest monitoring activities in support of the states’ efforts.

Several international organisations provide their technical and financial support to national organisations involved in the IFM. Over the past decade, the most important actors in the governance of IFM in the Congo Basin countries have been the Centre for International Development and Training of the University of Wolverhampton, World Resources Institute, Rainforest Foundation UK, and Environmental Investigation Agency with the majority of funding from the FAO, EU, and FCDO. Without the technical and financial support from these actors, IFM in the Congo Basin could arguably be non-existent. For this reason, IFM remains a potentially weak forest governance mechanism given its dependence on external support. This obviously provides disapproving actors in the region with the opportunity to challenge and question the autonomy and mandate of IFM.

Relationships between actors

The types and manifestations of the relationships and interactions identified here are broadly in line with literature on relationships between local NGOs, state agencies, communities, INGOs, and donors⁶.

Only recently have forest governance scholars begun to investigate the role of relationships in the implementation of IFM in the Congo Basin. Applying a governance analytical framework, Mbzibain and Ongolo (2019) characterised relationships in terms of cooperation, complementarity, rivalry, and substitution between IFM NGOs and the state in Cameroon. Mbzibain and Nkuinchua

(2021) examined the dynamics of NGO-state relationships in monitoring forest and wildlife in the Congo Basin, finding that the most recurrent relationships between IFM organisations and the state were complementary and competitive. Both actors utilised instrumentalisation strategies to influence or dominate the other based on their perceived power positions. Finally, cooperation was the least reported relationship between NGOs and the state. Complementary relationships are identified when NGOs and state share resources and tools in the fight against forest illegality. In the Congo Basin, this manifests itself through the issuing of IFM mandates to local NGOs and organisation of joint verification missions on the ground. In CAR, local NGOs fund training and joint control missions and by so doing, helping to re-establish the power of the state and presence on the ground. Regrettably, because of weak coercive pressures and strong power and financial interests of state and harmonious relationships with some illegal private sector actors, rivalrous and competitive relationships emerge. These play out through ignoring IFM reports, weak sanctions, and application of blame-avoidance tactics to undermine the legitimacy, independence, and mandate of IFM organisations. In these scenarios, both actors engage in co-optation/instrumentalisation games to influence each other. In DRC, this includes refusal to issue mission orders and the requirement to have MoUs in Cameroon in order to have more control. NGOs for their part leverage advocacy, activist international NGOs, and media outreach to draw attention and put pressure on the state. The very limited existence of cooperation relationships identified in the Republic of Congo and CAR for instance, reveal a situation of closeness with state and perceived lack of interest from IFM organisations to anger government or challenge sovereign position. Recent disagreements between MINFOF in Cameroon and the EU/GIZ over progress made with Cameroon's TLAS suggests a disconnect in priorities, interests, and motivations. These are issues identified by Carodenuto and Ramcilovic-Suominen (2014) as barriers to the implementation of the VPA in Cameroon. In fact, Cook et al. (2019) find that donor support to NGOs could rather reduce the responsiveness of local government.

The relationship between IFM organisations and the private sector remains elusive in the Congo Basin. IFM organisations have done little to engage with the private sector to create any winning relationships. As Mbzibain and Ongolo reveal, in Cameroon, private sector actors see IFM organisations as an additional burden they have to deal with. Consequently, they never provide access to concessions or forest exploitation and marketing information that could allow INGOs to assess their compliance with the rules in force. IM organisations increasingly rely on whistle-blowers, investigative tactics and modern technologies, such as drones and remote sensing to undertake their monitoring function. Information sharing between IM organisations and international capacity building and advocacy agencies such as Greenpeace and Global Witness have helped to name and shame, and shed light on the activities of companies involved in illegal activities in the Congo Basin (Business & Human Rights Resource Centre, 2019b). Considering the interactions between and among organisations, their networks and communities, international NGOs and donors, complex relationships are identified.

Table 5.3 An overview of actors' relationships and associated approaches in monitoring forest governance processes in the Congo Basin

<i>Actor</i>	<i>Dominant relationship</i>	<i>Approaches</i>
Other IM organisations	Cooperation; complementarity, rivalry	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Creation of IFM networks and coordination in SNOIE Congo and Cameroon and RENOI DRC ● Joint organisation of field missions ● Joint funding bids ● Expertise sharing and south-south collaboration ● Competition between larger more established urban-based and rural-based NGOs for funding, recognition, and positioning ● Duplication of efforts – development of parallel online platforms and applications
Local communities	Complementarity, downward accountability, representation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Awareness-raising activities of IM organisations ● Set up of community alert schemes such as Forest Link ● Legal support to communities to take companies to court
Civil society networks	Complementarity	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Submission of IFM reports and analysis for advocacy ● Funding of RENOI and PAOI networks and field missions by individual IM organisations
INGOs	Complementarity; rivalry, upward accountability, dependence	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Joint implementation of field activities, project consortia and expertise sharing within SNOIE Congo and Cameroon ● Competition for funding and positioning with donors ● Agenda setting ● Reporting ● Dependence on funding from INGOs – sub-grantees/implementing partners ● Limited cooperation and coordination of support to local IM organisations ● Access to technology and transparency platforms
Donors	Dependence, upward accountability, loyalty	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Dependence on intermittent funding ● Implementing partners ● Donors question the effectiveness of IFM organisations ● Reporting

5.4. Conclusion

In this chapter we reviewed the role of IFM using an input and output legitimacy lens and revealed that while IFM could be praised for strong contribution to various forest policy processes – such as promoting participation, voice, transparency

and representation – its contribution to output dimensions such as accountability, compliance and institutional effectiveness were more limited. We argued that this was the result of weak, coercive, mimetic, and normative institutional environments in the Congo Basin and the political economy games of actors, interests, and motivations and interactions. With this analysis, IM organisations can reassess their position in the Congo Basin’s policy soup, form alliances and relationships with private sector associations and networks, improve communication with citizens, clients, and consumer markets, and exert normative pressure on actors. They should strengthen their relationship management capacities, quality management systems certification, financial autonomy while leveraging the opportunities provided by local civil society networks, technical and advocacy INGOs to achieve impact and boomerang effects from their functions. By leveraging non-traditional forest law enforcement agencies such as the judiciary, and by advocating for enhanced institutional arrangement to address the issue of important power asymmetry between CSOs, state agencies and private companies, the initial gains in accountability and compliance effectiveness reported in Cameroon, CAR, and Gabon could be further strengthened and scaled up regionally.

More than 20 years after its introduction in the Congo Basin countries, independent forest monitoring remains a work in progress as a tool of environmental democracy necessary and the rule of law. Actors outside the administration as well as stakeholders in forest management, IFM organisations have a certain sphere of power and influence from the *res communis* of the management of forest lands and resources (Wete and Bintsoe, 2022). Set up to bring a technical support to strengthen the state role in ensuring legal compliance in forest activity, IFM in the CB gradually emancipated from its initial role to become a citizens’ tool to control and influence forest public action (Kengoum and Wete, 2022; Mbzibain and Nkuintchua, 2021) in line with Magdalijs’ classification of control of the administration action (Magdalijs, 2004). The citizen’s control of public action finds its basis both in the Montesquieu separation of powers principle (Montesquieu, 1748), whose objective is to limit arbitrariness and abuses, and in the right to participate in environmental issues stipulated by international agreements on environment and the protection of human rights.

Notes

- 1 In policy making a wicked problem is a problem that is difficult or impossible to solve because of incomplete, contradictory, and changing requirements that are often difficult to recognise.
- 2 Personal communication with international activist NGO staff.
- 3 EU signed a FLEGT VPA with Cameroon, Republic of Congo, and Central Africa Republic respectively on October 6, 2010, May 17, 2010, and November 28, 2011.
- 4 <https://pfb-cbfp.org/files/docs/news/12-decembre/Arr%C3%AAt%C3%A9%20conjoint%20162%20151220%20Clause%20bois%201%C3%A9gal%281%29.pdf>
- 5 Meeting notes with authors and members of the Joint VPA implementation committee in Bangui, CAR (2019) to discuss the impact and contribution of IFM to forest governance processes in the country.

- 6 Igoc, J. (2003) Scaling up civil society: Donor money, NGOs and the pastoralist land rights movement in Tanzania, *Development and Change*, 34(5), 863–885.

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