



POLITICAL ECONOMY DYNAMICS OF REGIONAL ORGANISATIONS IN AFRICA

PEDRO

The Commission of Central African Forests (COMIFAC): Global ambitions and hidden gains¹

This paper sets out to better inform stakeholders about why the Commission of Central African Forests (COMIFAC) and its national level stakeholders operate as they do. It concludes with implications for different stakeholders.

Political traction, member states interests and potential

Awareness about global climate change and environmental degradation has brought worldwide attention to and support for improved forest governance. This is also the case in Central Africa, one of the most poorly governed regions in the world. In response to the surge in international interest, the Commission of Central African Forests was founded in 2000 as a specialised regional organisation² committed to the harmonisation of forest and environmental policies. With the COMIFAC Convergence Plan as its central plan of action, COMIFAC has become the sub-regional reference body for forest protection and conservation.

COMIFAC has a large number of external partners - over 80 donors, multilateral organisations, international NGOs and others - reflecting the global interest in contributing or obtaining the protection of the Congo Basin forests. Consequently, the COMIFAC agenda is strongly shaped by external players and dynamics. Donors and international and national forestry-related NGOs fund most of the COMIFAC operational costs, programmes and projects. They exert considerable influence on the formulation of regional initiatives and policies. Many external partners are part of the Congo Basin Forest Partnership (CBFP), a voluntary platform with no power to discipline the voluntary members. Much aid is still provided through channels outside the CBFP.

However, external partner engagement with COMIFAC has not managed to generate enthusiasm for its agenda among member states. Non-payment of annual contributions and poor attendance rates at COMIFAC meetings point to low member state interest in regionally defined initiatives around forest governance. COMIFAC has managed to produce outputs such as joint declarations on international fora, legal instruments and guidelines in this area. Nevertheless, it is much harder to establish to what extent member states effectively improve forest governance in practice.

¹ Based on a March 2017 background paper by ECDPM, available at www.ecdpm.org/pedro/backgroundpapers. The Policy Brief and background paper were prepared under the BMZ-financed project on the *Political Economy Dynamics of Regional Organisations (PEDRO)*. Authors: Elke Verhaeghe (ev@ecdpm.org) and Jan Vanheukelom (jvh@ecdpm.org). Project team leader: Bruce Byiers (bby@ecdpm.org).

² In 2007, COMIFAC became a specialised institution of the Economic Community of Central African States (ECCAS) in an attempt to improve the financial sustainability of the specialised regional organisation.

Cameroon demonstrates how rhetorical commitments to development and conservation goals are often undermined by the collusion of stakeholders with vested interests or deeply ingrained public and private sector corruption, and by weak governance systems. External support strategies are ill adapted to these contextual blockages of improved forest and environmental governance. The conditionality and incentive packages attached to external interventions are generally too weak or poorly designed to win over the most powerful and influential stakeholders who benefit from the status quo.

Still, the COMIFAC Secretariat has managed to drive a number of actions and processes in the region that are conducive to positive outputs. Given its small structure and the lack of member state commitment, the secretariat does not act as a powerhouse, but rather a halfway house between a range of stakeholders that operate in a politically and otherwise fragile environment. It carefully operates within the margins for maneuver it has carved out, and seems to be able to avoid negative attention from the member states. A substantial part of the secretariat's agenda is about facilitating, convening, or enabling numerous stakeholders with an interest in tackling climate, environmental or forest governance related challenges. These stakeholders range from global NGOs, donors, multilateral agencies, domestic NGOs and CSOs to technocrats in government departments of member states that try to take parts of the broad agenda - often in a bottom-up way - forward. The gains from these efforts seem modest when compared to the vision, the agreements and the policies of the official COMIFAC agenda. Yet, when assessed against the broader canvas of instability in the region and of extreme forms of governance failures in member countries, the value of the secretariat's efforts can be appreciated more appropriately.

Implications for support

1. Support must be designed in a way that allows working with subsets of COMIFAC countries

- The wide diversity of COMIFAC member states and the interests represented make it difficult to mobilise the entire COMIFAC membership around any one integration objective.
- Nevertheless, the principle of variable geometry is built into COMIFAC's functioning, and it is quite common for particular initiatives to be implemented or 'piloted' among a small subset of COMIFAC member states.
- Real traction and impact are likely to be found where sub-regional integration or cooperation processes reflect the genuine interest of the member states involved.

1. Continue core support to the COMIFAC Secretariat given its contributions to a range of stakeholders and activities to improve forest and environmental governance in a highly conflictual and poorly governed region

- The COMIFAC secretariat has proven to be versatile and effectively managed. It has gained credibility as an umbrella organisation with a wide range of tasks and projects and has been a key broker in fostering bottom-up inputs and activities to improve forest and forest land governance.
- Many of its achievements took place outside member state government structures. Donors can circumvent failed governance systems in the member states through the COMIFAC secretariat and contribute instead to more effective bottom-up forms of cross-country and potentially regional cooperation.

2. Avoid 'best-practice' forest governance models and adapt support mechanism to the incentive environment

- Promoting best-practice models and rewarding empty signalling by member states provides public authorities with incentives to put more emphasis on looking better rather than performing better.

3. Strengthen cooperation with like-minded donors through the Congo Basin Forest Partnership (CBFP) to reduce the gap between principles and practice of aid effectiveness

- The CBFP is an important platform, but since it is voluntary, much aid is still provided through channels outside the CBFP. Better coordination between aid at the regional and national levels as well as improved cooperation between donors are key conditions for increasing the effectiveness of donor support.

Behind the formal structures of regional organisations is a messy world of regional power and politics. This messiness is often difficult to capture in the language of development cooperation and institutional development. Working with regional organisations and their programmes therefore implies engaging with complex, multi-level power and interest dynamics.

PEDRO, the Political Economy Dynamics of Regional Organisations, is an ECDPM project that looks at the politics behind regional organisations, and the structural factors, institutions and incentives that ultimately define the way in which countries and different stakeholders engage at a regional level. PEDRO covers 17 African regional organisations and 11 policy areas. For each of these, ECDPM has applied a political economy approach to help understand the dynamics and their effects in different regions and policy areas.

The studies are framed around three key questions: the first relates to the political traction of the regional organisation as this helps assess whether the regional organisation has enabled regional decision making and if it has contributed to implementation. The second focuses on the member state interests in engaging with the regional organisation, especially the more resourceful and powerful ones (the so-called 'swing states'). The third looks at the areas with most traction where regional and national level interests seem to be most aligned for regional outcomes.

The reports aim to present information and insights that can help regional stakeholders navigate the obstacles and better respond to reform opportunities. Rather than providing specific operational recommendations, the political economy approach encourages more reality-based discussions among practitioners and reformers about feasible ways to address regional challenges. It is hoped that this may help tailor the ambitions and approaches of donors and reformers and help identify ways to support national or regional champions or coalitions to take regional cooperation and integration forward.