

TOWARDS A WEST AFRICA FOREST DIALOGUE



Above: First West Africa Forest Consultation Meeting [Photo: IUCN]

How can forests be made to generate wealth & effectively reduce poverty in West Africa?

An active consultation has been building over several months among a number of regional and international organisations (amongst others; FAO, IUCN, UEMOA, ECOWAS, UNEP) on the type of support to provide to governments and regional organisations towards a regional dialogue on the sustainable management of forest resources with the goal of improving the efficiency of forests in alleviating poverty in West Africa.

This issue constituted the core of discussions by a high level meeting organized by The World Conservation Union – IUCN on 3rd and 4th July 2006 in Ouagadougou – Burkina Faso. Opening speeches delivered respectively by Professor Aimé Nianogo – acting Regional Director for IUCN-West Africa, Mr. Issa Bikienga, Deputy Executive Secretary of the Permanent Inter-state Committee for Drought Control in the Sahel – CILSS, Mr. Félix Dansou – Commissioner for Rural Development & Environment at the Economic & Monetary Union of West Africa – UEMOA, Dr. M.O. Afolabi – Deputy Executive Secretary of the Economic Community of West African States – ECOWAS and Mr. Fernando Salinas – Forester, civil servant at the FAO Regional Office for Africa; all recalled that West Africa's forests, measuring – 743,000 km² in 2005, provide a wide range of goods, amongst others, wood and non wood products including edible products for domestic consumption and trade, and services amongst others, soil and water conservation. Meanwhile, a number of problems exist: competency in forest governance needs to be improved, the value of forest products needs to be better appreciated, forest policies better coordinated, results from international forestry meetings better exploited and the impacts of economic initiatives on forest ecosystems well assessed. Consequently, the contribution of forests in wealth generation and in national economies remained relatively weak. A regional framework for collaboration on forest issues was proposed as a catalytic process towards lasting solutions.

Experiences with regional forest frameworks & way forward for West Africa

Institutional representatives at the workshop (FAO, UEMOA, ECOWAS, CILSS, IUCN including the IUCN Netherlands Committee, the International Institute for Research in Agro-Forestry – ICRAF, the Centre for International Forestry Research – CIFOR, the World Wide Fund for Nature – WWF, Fauna & Flora International – FFI, and the United Nations Environmental Programme – UNEP) all advocated for on-going institutional integration processes to be accompanied by harmonised forest management taking account of all ecological zones from the Sahel to the humid areas. Such a framework, expected to engage all countries of the West Africa sub-region will make use of amongst others, local culture and research results to guide development of forest policies as well as integrate a regional dimension to forestry training. Experiences shared from existing forest frameworks such as the Amazon Cooperation Treaty, the Conference on Dense and Humid Forest Ecosystems of Central Africa – CEFDHAC, and the Central Africa Forestry Commission (COMIFAC), revealed how agencies responsible for forest and wildlife, forest research centres, universities, protected area agencies, NGOs and others benefit through networks provided by such regional frameworks to share experience and achieve synergy.

Finally, the principle of a West Africa multi-actor forest dialogue was adopted with the possibility of leading to a Heads of State forest summit after appropriate stages. The way forward includes amongst others, the development and submission of advocacy documents promoting this process for a larger debate at the UEMOA-ECOWAS policy forum for environmental improvement in West Africa scheduled for October 2006 in Ouagadougou.



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