

FSC-certified forest management

V Social performance



Main street in the village of Ngombé.

Next to the premises of IFO lies the town of Ngombé with a population of about 8,000. Most of the 1,100 workers of IFO and their families live there. At the end of the afternoon one can see the men walking home, in their yellow and orange work clothes. Boys play soccer on dusty fields, running and shouting. It is a town of contrasts. There is a busy, long main street, with little shops on each side, selling household articles, spare parts, food and drinks, like everywhere in Africa. Newly built houses with floors of concrete and walls of stone overlook much older houses of wood and clay.

It is IFO that has built the new houses for the workers and their families, so they can live in healthy conditions. IFO pays for their electricity. Tree cutter Ambroise Bimeth lives in one of these houses, together with his wife and three daughters. When I visit him in the late Friday afternoon, he is busy cleaning his motorcycle. I have a glance into the cosy living room with a big couch and television, but we decide to sit outside. Ambroise brings chairs.



IFO has built new houses for the workers and their families, so they can live in healthy conditions.



Hospital doctor Fabien Ngendakumana from Burundi.

IFO offers professional training and education to its workers. They take part in a pension fund like in Europe.

I ask Ambroise whether managing forests in a sustainable way is important. ‘Yes, it is,’ he answers, ‘it is important for our children. When we protect the forest and the young trees, the trees will grow and our children will be able to harvest the forest too. We have to protect wildlife, elephants, monkeys, everything. If they disappear, our children would not be able to see them in nature, but only on television.’

The way IFO supports its workers and the population in the area is impressive. There is a small hospital with a doctor from Burundi and a team of nurses. Soon a surgeon will join them. IFO pays their salaries and vaccinations and other pharmaceuticals. Mortality rate for children that are brought to the hospital in the town of Ngombé is 3 times lower than the national average for child mortality.

In a big store, villagers can buy meat subsidised by IFO. The price is the same as for bushmeat, so there is no need to buy bushmeat from poachers. This helps to reduce pressure on wildlife in the concession. Besides, the meat is not sold out in the open, hot, humid air, but kept fresh in freezers. IFO helps by paying the electricity and the rent for the shopkeeper from Senegal.

Nearby is the library, which has been set up by IFO. The NGO Agir from France has provided the books, IFO has arranged for five computers and six laptops. I watch schoolchildren practice Word by copying texts from their schoolbooks. They can also learn how to use Excel, librarian Audrey Marine Mampouya Louaza tells me, adding there are courses for grown ups too. IFO sponsors the town’s sport clubs, where soccer, handball and Ndzango are played. The latter is a Congolese sport in which two girls engage in a rhythmic contest.

I meet the head of IFO’s personnel department, Congolese Albert Saturnin M. Ontsiayi. Asked about his priorities, he



IFO’s hospital in Ngombé. Mortality rate for children that are brought here, is 3 times lower than the national average for child mortality.

BETTER LIFE Ambroise (1967) started working for IFO in February 2002. The job at IFO meant a better life. Ambroise was unemployed between 1986 and 2000. During those years he grew crops on the field and had to hunt and sell bush meat to make money, so that he could buy clothing and shoes for his daughters and pay their school fees.

We continue talking, the day comes to an end and darkness falls. Ambroise’s wife has joined us silently and nearby one of their daughters and a girlfriend listen to the conversation.



A young boy practices Word in the library.



Primary school set up by IFO.



Albert Saturnin M. Ontsiayi, head of IFO's personnel department: 'Important for the moral is that the workers are paid on a fixed date.'



Dieter Haag, general manager of IFO.

immediately replies: 'Good health which means physical health and mental health.' He adds: 'Important for the moral is that the workers are paid on a fixed date.' He is so right, so many employees in other areas of the Congo Basin have to wait months to receive their salary.

IFO offers professional training and education to its workers. It pays its workers more than other companies in the forest sector in the Republic of Congo, IFO's general manager Dieter Haag (1956) from Germany tells me. I ask him how I can check this. 'UNI Congo, the union of employers in the Republic of Congo, can show you the numbers,' Haag replies.

The workers are represented by four labour unions who negotiate with the management. IFO pays the training of members of the work council. The workers take part in a pension fund like in Europe. They receive holiday pay and extra money when they get married, at the birth of a (legal)

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child and are also supported financially when there is a death. IFO provides its workers with loans when they need it.

CONSENT IFO is home to 16,000 people in total. They live in 80 villages across the concession. IFO's tree harvesting operations can only take place after so-called Free, Prior and Informed Consent (FPIC) by the indigenous people and others who live there. FPIC is part of the standards and guidelines of the Forest Stewardship Council. Prior to harvesting trees, IFO meets with the local communities and indigenous people to discuss all impacts of the harvest and to make sure that sites and resources which are important to them, are spared. These may be sacred areas, fishing and hunting grounds and parts of the forest with fruit trees.

Continuous participatory consultation is a key issue for IFO. IFO representatives and forest inhabitants meet on a regular basis, in total almost 300 times per year. If there are grievances among forest inhabitants or IFO's employees, mechanisms are in place to resolve these.

IFO invests an annual 130,000 euros into a development fund to support forest inhabitants with, for instance, developing small scale agriculture. It has also established a grammar school to raise literacy among children.



An indigenous woman has collected wild vegetables in the forest.