

Green heart of Africa

by Meindert Brouwer

For almost 25 years Cameroon-born Emmanuel Ze Meka (1951) served the International Tropical Timber Organization (ITTO), of which the last eight years as Executive Director. In November 2015 Ze Meka stepped down. Law enforcement and innovation in agriculture are key elements to reduce deforestation in Central Africa, he says. A conversation with a forest veteran about forests and biodiversity in the green heart of Africa and what has to be done to keep it green.

Ze Meka grew up near the forest, a hundred kilometres south of the capital of Yaoundé. He recalls going into the forest as a child in the late 1950's: 'My parents were farmers and I was involved in many activities in the forest, such as cash-crop farming, mainly cocoa, food crop farming, such as cassava and ground nut. I also accompanied my father to trap wildlife for our family consumption. At that time, wildlife was very abundant in the forest and bush meat represented a sizable part of our diet. I also accompanied my father to go fishing. Our trips in the forest were very enjoyable and exciting, as we could collect nuts, barks, mushrooms on the way and when the season was suitable, caterpillars. Forest was the centre of our life and it provided generously what we needed, even medicine.'



Emmanuel Ze Meka.

The forest of his youth has changed dramatically. Ze Meka: 'Now wildlife is scarce, because of the use of guns. During my childhood, we used to set traps with forest rope. Certain types of mushrooms are disappearing, for example those we used to collect around the rivers, as those areas are now being used for commercial maize farming. Trees that were attracting caterpillars are being cut indiscriminately. Rivers are drying up.'

LIVELIHOOD 'Nevertheless,' Ze Meka observes, 'the people of communities in Central Africa still rely on the forests for their livelihood. The forest also represents very important cultural and spiritual values as it is intimately linked with people's social activities and interests, customary beliefs and

‘Forests in Central Africa play a crucial role in mitigating climate change.’

religions. The forest is a centre of spirituality. For example, the traditional initiation rites of young boys in many places in Central Africa are still performed in the forest by community leaders.’

The forest is of great significance to the world community as well, Ze Meka continues: ‘The Congo Basin of Central Africa represents the second largest tropical forest area in the world, after the Amazon Basin. Its importance for the protection of terrestrial biodiversity is immense. Many countries in Central Africa, such as the Republic of Congo, Democratic Republic of Congo, Cameroon and Gabon are recognized to have mega-biodiversity, with many endemic species. Forests in Central Africa also play a crucial role in mitigating climate change. This is particularly important as the countries in Central Africa themselves are not important greenhouse gas emitters. Forests in Central Africa also supply the world with many valuable resources, including timber products.’

What are threats to forests in Central Africa and what should be done?

Ze Meka: ‘One of the threats to forests in Central Africa is the steady conversion of forests into industrial plantations, in particular rubber and palm oil plantations. However, we have to recognise that these plantations create jobs and provide substantial revenues to the countries concerned. What is lacking is land-use planning. The apparent sentiment is that investors can do what they want, wherever they want, for instance without considering high conservation value areas, or the interests of local communities. What is important is appropriate and enforceable land-use planning, so that forests that should be preserved as forests are determined and appropriate measures will be taken to ensure their integrity. The level of conversion should be discussed with the involvement of all stakeholders, including local communities.’

‘Another threat is illegal logging by both forest companies in the formal sector, and mainly, in the informal sector. It is reported that in some countries in Central Africa the



informal sector supplies a sizable amount of timber that is locally commercialized or exported. Forest law enforcement is needed to tackle the issue of illegal logging from both the formal and informal sectors. In this sense it is good news to know that many countries in Central Africa are engaged with the European Union for Voluntary Partnerships Agreements (VPA) which should reinforce their capability to enforce forestry laws.’

POPULATION GROWTH

‘Population growth has a major impact too, particularly in



the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) and Cameroon. Farming technologies are not advanced yet, and more and more forests are needed for conversion into agriculture to feed the increasing population. The issue of unsustainable fuel wood collection may also be linked to this population increase, as it is the main source of energy for most households. Slowing the rate of population increase is not easy and it is a long term process, and the situation seems out of hand for some countries such as DRC. Therefore, the solution would depend on the development and dissemination of improved farming techniques supported by appropriate technologies. If alternative ways to efficiently produce more food per hectare are not found, forests will continue to shrink. Agricultural research is necessary to progress towards that end, as well as the utilization of fertilizers to improve agricultural production.’

Ze Meka adds: ‘It is also important to reduce fuel wood collection, through for instance the processing of biomass energy, the development and dissemination of efficient cooking-stoves, or the use of cooking gas in rapidly growing cities.’

Resuming: ‘Although progress is slow, we can see that some countries in Central Africa are determined to conserve their

ITTO

ITTO is an intergovernmental organisation promoting the conservation and sustainable management, use and trade of tropical forest resources. Its 72 members represent more than 80% of the world’s tropical forests and more than 90% of the global tropical timber trade. ITTO’s headquarters are located in Yokohama, Japan. www.itto.int

forests. Some have ambitious programs for biodiversity conservation. Others are very active in climate change negotiations or have made steady progress in increasing independently certified forests. Let’s hope that this awareness will lead to more progress in the future towards the noble objective of sustainable forest management.’

Many people in Central Africa are poor. Can sustainable forest management contribute to more welfare and well-being?

Ze Meka: ‘Yes, it certainly can. Achieving the welfare and



In his capacity as Executive Director of ITTO, Emmanuel Ze Meka (in yellow shirt) visited Kinzono village in the Democratic Republic of the Congo. ITTO has assisted the inhabitants to improve the production of essential oils of the eucalyptus citriodora tree.



well-being of people in Central Africa will require that three pillars are properly addressed: economic sustainability, ecological sustainability and social sustainability. Sustainable forest management (SFM) has these three pillars in place. It provides local people with jobs and decent salaries in timber harvesting and timber processing, so they can buy food they cannot produce themselves and purchase other things they need.’

‘People in Central Africa can benefit from well-managed forests in other ways too. They can sustainably collect many non-timber forest products, such as nuts, mushrooms, various barks and fruits, caterpillars and snails and sell them on the market. Other sources of income are ecotourism in

‘What is important is appropriate and enforceable land-use planning.’

areas rich in biodiversity and maybe REDD+ payment for forest conservation and sustainable forest management. (REDD+ stands for reducing emissions from deforestation and forest degradation plus conservation of forest carbon stocks, sustainable management of forests and enhancement of forest carbon stocks. Local people could be paid for doing that, ed.) Sustainable management of forests will prevent negative environmental impacts on the populations and will provide them with many ecosystem services for their well-being, such as clean water, clean air, flood prevention and healthy biodiversity, including medicinal plants for their use.’

Militia are involved in killing elephants for the international trade in ivory. What is needed to stop the killing and stop the trade and how could this be realized?

Ze Meka: ‘The first measure should be the enforcement of a trade ban on ivory. Where there is no market, the supply will die out. CITES should be given enough resources to perform its mission, and collaboration with countries where markets of illegal ivory are located should be strengthened. (CITES stands for Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora. It’s there to make sure that international trade in wild animals, wild plants, their parts and wild animal and plant products does not threaten their continuing existence, ed.) Collaboration with local communities is also essential as they can alert regular authorities on the activities of the poachers. Forestry guards in protected areas should be well equipped and in a sufficient number, and where necessary, they could be assisted by regular armed forces.’

People hunt for bush meat everywhere. It’s a big threat to biodiversity. Do you see opportunities to reverse this trend, are there solutions?

Ze Meka: ‘I think that we have to consider two different situations: hunting for personal consumption and hunting for commercial purposes. Local communities are deriving the essential part of their protein from wildlife. This personal consumption does not represent a great threat

to conservation, and such communities would certainly not like the situation to change. Hunting for commercial purposes is more devastating and should be controlled by the appropriate authorities. This type of control, with the support of NGO’s, is becoming very effective in some countries, such as Cameroon where the NGO Forest Ecosystems of Central Africa (ECOFAC) is very active. The solutions here are to raise awareness and to enforce the forestry law.’

Global pressure on natural resources in Central Africa is huge. How can illegal logging, forest degradation, the killing of wildlife and unsustainable mining be reduced? How can national governments, provincial governments and community leaders in Central Africa get hold of the resource market?

Ze Meka: ‘First of all, I think that it is important to mention here that in Central Africa most forests belong to the States. In Central Africa, most governments are operating in a very centralized political system, which leaves little room for provincial governments to take decisions on forest resources allocation. So the commitment of the States – the national governments – to manage their forests sustainably is very important. In view of this objective the intergovernmental organisation COMIFAC has been created in 1999. (COMIFAC stands for Commission des Forêts d’Afrique Centrale which consists of ten member States in Central Africa: Cameroon, Central African Republic, Chad, Republic of Congo, Democratic Republic of Congo, Rwanda, Burundi, Gabon, Equatorial Guinea and the island state of São Tomé e Príncipe, ed.)’

‘COMIFAC has developed a strategic plan, detailing several actions to be taken with regard to sustainable forest management. Illegal logging and illegal trade, for instance, often involve forest companies licensed in one way or another by the States. The States have to enforce the laws so that these companies manage their concessions sustainably. It is also important to mention here that most forestry laws are almost perfect. What is lacking is their enforcement.’

‘If alternative ways to efficiently produce more food per hectare are not found, forests will continue to shrink.’

INFORMAL SECTOR

‘Another element that fuels illegal logging and illegal trade in Central Africa is the operation of the informal sector, which plays a very important role in timber harvesting and timber trade in Central Africa. Although the State has a responsibility in this situation, it is also important to have the support of local communities.’

‘We are witnessing the emergence of community forests in some Central African countries, but the move is still very timid and most of the time hijacked by the elites.’

‘In recent years the killing of wildlife has been a major concern in Central Africa, with the poachers becoming more and more equipped with war guns and financially well supported, including by some partners overseas. Local communities can play a key role in this connection in alerting the authorities about the presence of poachers. However, most of the time they are not in a position to confront these well-equipped poachers, so that local authorities have to provide appropriate support, sometimes including armed forces.’

‘The issue of unsustainable mining goes along the same lines as illegal logging and calls for combined actions by local communities and the States.’

What is the role of governments of countries outside Africa who have operations in Central Africa, to keep forests standing?

Ze Meka: ‘It is important to note that the forestry business is a private business, and companies operating in Africa do not represent their countries. However, these countries may encourage the companies to abide by the local forestry laws and practice sound forest management. Some countries have gone as far as establishing guidelines for their companies operating overseas in forestry. Another way would be to fight illegal logging and illegal trade through the establishment of appropriate procurement policies in preventing the entry of illegal timber and timber products into their markets. We all know that one of the

bottlenecks to implement sustainable forest management is the insufficient law enforcement in Central Africa. I would recommend to provide assistance to developing countries in this field, as well as incentives to promote forest certification in Central Africa.’

How do the European Union and the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) contribute?

Ze Meka: ‘Many country members of the EU provide direct assistance to countries in Central Africa to promote sustainable forest management. The EU, as an entity, is also stimulating the Voluntary Partnership Agreements (VPA) to promote legal and sustainable timber and is assisting countries in meeting the criteria of the VPA. The access to the European market, through FLEGT licensed timber, also represents a good incentive for sustainable forest management. (Read more about VPA and FLEGT in the boxtext, ed.) Among ASEAN countries, China has shown some commitment in establishing guidelines for Chinese companies operating in Central Africa. It would be good if other emerging markets, such as Vietnam could also come on board.’

What can importers, traders, retailers and consumers of timber and timber products outside Africa do?

Ze Meka: ‘As mentioned earlier, forestry laws in Central Africa are generally good and can help progress towards sustainable forest management. The various procurement policies effected in importing countries are also generally very good. Therefore, importers, retailers, and consumers have to abide by the laws and sensitize their partners on the importance of respecting the law. It is also worth mentioning that forest resources are a very valuable commodity and all who are involved in the production and consumption chains should have this in mind and avoid wasting these resources.’

What is the role of global NGO's and national and local NGO's in Central Africa?

Ze Meka: ‘Global NGO’s can raise global awareness on



Tree planting.

the importance of preserving forests in Central Africa for the livelihood of local people, for the protection of biodiversity and for their importance in mitigating climate change. They can also help attract substantial funding to meet these objectives, implement pilot projects and share their experience with local NGO’s. They usually also have more influence on national authorities to move the forestry agenda in the right direction.’

‘Local NGO’s have a better knowledge on local circumstances as they are dealing on a day-to-day basis with local communities and local authorities. Local NGO’s are the ones who can address any conflict at first hand regarding the local management of forest resources. They can also assist local communities in communicating the best approach to manage their forest resources, to preserve their rights, to channel their concerns to the local authorities, to build their capability to fight illegal logging, etc. In this respect local NGO’s generally have an edge over international NGO’s, as they can speak the local languages. The main problem facing local NGO’s is usually the lack of resources to carry out their programmes.’

FLEGT

FLEGT refers to the FLEGT Action Plan of the European Union. FLEGT stands for Forest Law Enforcement, Governance and Trade. A key element of the action plan is the Voluntary Partnership Agreement (VPA), a legally binding trade agreement between the European Union and a timber-producing country in the tropics. The purpose of a VPA is to ensure that timber and timber products exported to the EU come from legal sources. The agreements also help timber-exporting countries stop illegal logging by improving regulation and governance of the forest sector.

The EU FLEGT Facility supports the European Union, its member states and partner countries implementing the EU FLEGT Action Plan. The facility is hosted by the European Forest Institute.

Source: www.euflegt.efi.int



‘Sustainable management of forests will provide populations with many ecosystem services for their well-being.’



Can banks or other financial institutions play a role in keeping forests in Central Africa standing?

Ze Meka: ‘Banks certainly can play a role. They have to understand the forestry laws and be selective on projects and the forest companies they would like to support. Supporting responsible forest companies will help promote sustainable forest management and will help bring all related benefits. Supporting irresponsible companies will promote illegal activities, fuel illegal logging and conflicts with local communities, deprive local communities and the States of forest revenues and increase negative environmental impacts. Supporting irresponsible companies will also create an unfair advantage for them on the market. Banks, development banks particularly, can also assist countries in Central Africa to carry out structural reforms. Banks could also consider schemes for financing smaller scale initiatives towards sustainable forest management than the mega-projects that usually attract their attention.’

In the end, isn't it all about cultural and personal values whether we are willing to save forests or not? If you think a change in mindset is necessary, how can this be realised?

Ze Meka: ‘We certainly can see that most problems affecting the conservation of forests are linked to the lack of awareness of their importance, in terms of the benefits they provide, on a local level, national and international level. Raising this awareness by all means is important. However, we have to recognize that the current generation, mainly guided by seeking quick profits, finds it difficult to make the necessary changes. In these circumstances forestry education should be promoted among the younger generation, in addition to making the current generation aware about the importance of conserving forests. Having future leaders who can fully appreciate the importance of forests will create a very strong commitment to conserve forests; this is true for Central Africa, as it is for the rest of the world.’

What are the conditions and what are the instruments to leave short-term profit-thinking behind us and focus on long-term welfare policies?

Ze Meka: ‘It is very difficult to get rid of short-term profit-thinking. It is part of the culture of the current generation, which relates accumulated revenues to success in society, sometimes at the expense of the protection of natural resources. If we want to focus on long-term welfare policies,

we should give equal prominence to the other pillars of sustainability on the one hand, that is to say, the social and environmental aspects, while economic greed should be reduced on the other hand. Another aspect that should be considered is to continuing to build human solidarity, as short-term profit thinking usually happens at the expense of others. The issue of climate change is a good example and it shows how private and local interests can work against the welfare of all.'

'The establishment of protected areas in areas of high conservation value versus their allocation for land-use options producing quick profits, such as industrial agriculture, is a good example where long-term welfare can prevail over short-term profit-thinking. The control of wildlife poaching by communities in the buffer zones of some protected areas may also be regarded as building up long-term welfare policies. The adoption of briquettes and efficient cooking-stoves, versus the use of fuel wood which is destroying the environment, may also be considered as a sustainable long-term policy.'

Can traditional knowledge of people living in the forest, contribute to conservation of fauna and flora in the forest?

Ze Meka: 'Traditional knowledge is very important for the conservation of forests in Central Africa. Local communities have been living in harmony with forest for a long time. They know the direct benefits they can derive from forests, such as fruits, barks, leaves, roots and they would like to protect the species that produce these benefits. They know the trees that are suitable for caterpillars and they would like to preserve them. They know the trees that are used for traditional medicine and they would like to keep them standing. They know the micro-ecosystems that are favourable to produce mushrooms. In addition they know the trees that you should not cut for spiritual purposes. Unfortunately, people who know how to use forest products for traditional medicine are disappearing, most of the time

without transferring their traditional knowledge to the young generation.' There are complaints that indigenous people who have always hunted for subsistence, are being harassed by anti-poaching squads occasionally. When asked what could be solutions to avoid these clashes, Ze Meka judges differently: 'Clashes are mainly related to commercial hunting. Many times it is reported that a large number of dead animals are seized in lorries heading to some cities. This is obviously for commercial purposes and anti-poaching squads have the right to enforce the law.'

FUTURE Could Ze Meka imagine a future Central Africa without forests? 'No,' Ze Meka says, 'That's impossible for me. Forests are what make Central Africa. All the marks the people know would have disappeared, there would be no trees, no animals and no resources that usually come with them. The food style would change and food availability would be substantially reduced, rivers would have dried out, etc. People would feel like that they were living in another world. At the global level we would have lost the second lung of the planet and the world climate would certainly face dramatic consequences.'

Leaving office after devoting his entire professional life to keep forests standing, what would be Ze Meka's advice to the youths of Central Africa? Ze Meka: 'My advice to the youths would be to be environmentally conscious. They still have the chance to enjoy some luxurious forests with plenty of rich fauna and flora in Central Africa. However, there are certain threats that could completely change this picture if they, in their capacity as future leaders in Central Africa, would not take the right decisions to implement long-term sustainability policies. Before becoming the new leaders, they should also be the vigils of the current generation, to ensure that they take the right decisions to conserve forests in Central Africa to pass them on in a sound condition.'

Photos: Jaap van der Waarde, WWF
Photos Emmanuel Ze Meka: ITTO

'Forestry laws in Central Africa are generally good. What is lacking is their enforcement.'

