



Republic of Congo

FSC-certified forest management Keeping the forest and bettering lives

Text and photos Meindert Brouwer

The rainforest concession of timber producer IFO in the north of the Republic of Congo is the largest FSC-certified single forest concession in Africa.

Being part of the Congo Basin rainforest, IFO's concession has an area of 1.2 million hectares, more than one quarter of the size of Switzerland. IFO employs almost 1,100 workers. Most of them live in the village of Ngombé, next to the IFO premises and sawmills on the banks of the wide river Sangha. IFO belongs to the Swiss based timber company Interholco and stands for Industrie Forestière de Ouesso, the main city nearby.

Logging according to standards of the Forest Stewardship Council (FSC) means this takes place with respect for the forest and the rights of the people living in the concession. What does that mean? In January 2016 I set out to visit the IFO concession. I wanted to see with my own eyes what FSC-certified forest management is like and how the local population (16,000) benefits from the presence of IFO in the region. I wanted to see how huge tropical trees are felled and what the forest looks like after harvest.

Going there meant that I would meet the people at the very basis of FSC-certified products from the African tropics: wooden tables, chairs, garden furniture, garden walls, doors, window frames, floors, wooden coverings, lock gates in harbours and more.

Timber from the north of the Republic of Congo on its way to the harbour at the Atlantic Ocean.

Aerial view: © Interholco

Photo insect on wood: © U. Binhack / Interholco

Photos wildlife: Thomas Britvec



FSC-certified forest management

I Felling of a tree

Every morning at four o'clock – well before sunrise – 240 Congolese forest workers leave the town of Ngombé, climb in four lorries and head for the tree harvesting zone. The concession is large and they first have to drive 80 km to get to the zone, sitting on wooden benches in the loading platform, yellow helmets on their head, some with a jacket over their orange working clothes and a shawl across their face against the morning breeze.

Frenchman Thomas Britvec, IFO's director of harvesting, leads the daily operation. He takes me in his Toyota Landcruiser. Although Britvec is still in his late thirties, he already has 25 years of experience in forestry. Brought up in the region of Picardie in the northwest of France near the woods of Compiègne, Britvec started as an apprentice in his home region, only 14 years old. After mastering the profession he instructed forest workers in Gabon, Democratic Republic of Congo, Togo, Cameroon, Central African Republic and Guyana as well, before joining IFO.

We all meet in an open area in the forest. It is a quarter to six and broad daylight now. Britvec parks his land cruiser exactly next to the only other land cruiser. Why so neatly, there is plenty of space, I ask. Britvec makes clear that all forest activities, including parking his land cruiser, have to be structured, controlled and carried out well. And so they are. As the forest workers get out of their lorries, taking off their shawls, the engines of the motor saws are waiting for them, neatly drawn up in a battle array on the ground in front of a shed.

FOCUSED Britvec is not tall, around 1.70 metres, but he has a natural authority. An orange helmet on his head, stubbles on his cheeks, wearing a chequered, light red, flannel shirt and black pants, his green-grey eyes look quickly everywhere. He is very focused, gives orders and is clearly on top of things. Looking at a map with many dots in different colours, representing trees that have to be felled and trees that cannot be



Thomas Britvec, IFO's director of harvesting.



Jean-Paul Belinda, right hand man of Britvec.



Early morning: arrival at the tree harvesting zone.

felled and have to stay, Britvec discusses today's work with Jean-Paul Belinda, his Congolese right hand man.

The harvesting of trees and getting the logs to the sawmills requires that the men act together, a piece of work leaving no room for improvisation. The 240 forest workers and

Tree felling team



From left to right:
Ambroise Bimeth,
Jean Romeo Openda and
Faustin Okoutonandza.

their supervisors have 10 bulldozers at their disposal, 3 big skidders, 2 small skidders, a riding garage, 5 land cruisers, 2 long transportation vehicles and the 4 lorries mentioned above.

Many different tasks have to be carried out. Trees have to be felled. Crowns of trees which have been lying on the ground for 14 days to release the tension in the wood have to be sawn off. Logs which can reach a length of more than 20 metres have to be sawn into separate pieces so skidders are able to pull the timber out to the forest road.

Britvec drives with his land cruiser from one location to another. The dirt roads in the green forest are orange-brown. Everywhere forest workers are on the move or heating bundles of food above small fires on sandy spots. Only there making a small fire is permitted. When Britvec stops to discuss the work, I walk around. I see workers measuring huge logs and writing their diameters on the outer sections. A skidder with a big grab lifts a log which weighs over 12 tons onto a long transportation vehicle.

The moment has arrived. I will witness the felling of trees. On foot we follow a small path that has been cut through the undergrowth by machete. It is a rather long way through the bushes and I am almost losing my breath, trying to make a good impression and be just as fast as Britvec who is in front of me and is looking back over his shoulder from time to time. Then we arrive at the area in the forest where we

are supposed to be. Four trees have to be felled, two of the species Tali and two Sapellis. Their height is 25 metres and more.

BLADE The tree felling team consists of three men: Ambroise Bimeth, the tree feller; Jean Romeo Openda, the assistant tree feller and Faustin Okoutonandza, the administrative assistant who will stamp the IFO-mark and registration number of the tree on the log and on the remaining tree stump.

The blade of the motor saw Ambroise is using, is enormous, bigger than the ones used in Europe, necessary to master huge tropical hardwood trees. The diameter of the trunks may be as big as 2 metres. Ambroise is protected. FSC-certification means that safety of the workers is well monitored. He has an orange helmet which is connected with a screen of wire gauze in front of his face to protect his eyes from dispersing sawdust and possibly pieces of bark. Of course his ears are closed off against the noise of the chain saw. He wears protective clothing and heavy shoes which protect his feet.

Before Ambroise starts the engine, he carefully cleans the links of the chain saw with a small stick to make sure the saw is sharp. If it is not, the huge saw may shake when it is inside the hardwood tree and exert wrong pressure on his arms and shoulders. The forces are huge. While Ambroise is preparing, assistants Jean Romeo and Faustin clear the



FSC-certification means that safety of the workers is well monitored.



ground around the tree by cutting sprouts and lianas with a machete. The team determines the direction in which the tree has to fall in order to minimise damage to the forest. The tree should not take other big trees with it when it falls.

Then Ambroise starts the engine. It roars while Ambroise puts the enormous blade into the huge trunk of the first tree. I can hardly see his face through the blazing sawdust. His craftsmanship is unbelievable. First he directs his blade horizontally right through the trunk, I see the end of the saw coming out on the other side. Then he cuts a wedge over which the tree has to fall at the end. After that he cuts notches in both sides of the tree, in the front and in the back, so the trunk will not splinter. In total he makes eight manoeuvres.

STICKS Before Ambroise makes his final move, Jean Romeo puts two long green sticks of a shrub into the incision in the trunk at the side opposite of the wedge. If they stay down

while Ambroise is sawing, the tree will finally fall over the wedge in the right direction. If the sticks go up, the tree is heading for the side where Ambroise is busy working.

While he is sawing, Ambroise can see the sticks in front of him, but he cannot look up to see what the tree is doing. Besides, the tree is so tall, so huge, so heavy – it may weigh as much as 15 tons – that it is impossible to control and change its movements by sawing and looking up at the same time. For safety, a hinge of ‘holding wood’ is maintained in another incision, so the tree cannot fall on Ambroise and on us, the spectators . . .

Three of the four trees go down like matches in only about 10 to 15 minutes each. The fourth one takes longer. Its trunk is so very straight that it is hard to estimate, even for the experienced Ambroise and his colleagues, in which direction it will fall. During the sawing the green sticks have gone up . . .



Logs waiting to be sawn.

A skidder lifts a log which weighs over 12 tons onto a long transportation vehicle.

II Rotation in the forest

FSC-certified forest management is based on a sound forest management plan. The forest which is harvested is divided in separate zones, like slices of a big cake, usually 25 or 30. The zones may differ in size, depending on the density of the forest and other forest conditions. Each year the harvesting of trees takes place in one zone only. During the years that follow, the timber company moves from one zone to another. It is called rotation. After 25 or 30 years, depending on the number of zones, the timber company may return to the first zone and harvest there again. In the meantime trees, especially young trees, have had time to grow. IFO applies a rotation of 30 years.

Since logging takes place in one zone only, there is no logging disturbance in the other zones. Therefore the larger an FSC-certified forest concession is, the better it is for the animals that live there, they have more space to withdraw. IFO’s concession is home to approximately 70,000 gorillas and approximately 4,000 elephants.

HIGH CONSERVATION VALUE IFO only harvests trees selectively in 800,000 hectares. All together 355,000 hectares across the concession are not touched because they are so-called High Conservation Value areas or because they are vulnerable,



Antoine Couturier, IFO’s director responsible for environmental and social company policies and certification.

such as water banks and swampy forest. The remaining part of the concession consists of villages and areas that have been assigned to the forest communities.

High Conservation Value areas are important to maintain the level of biodiversity. They may be nesting or feeding areas for animals or contain rare, endemic plants and old patrimonium trees. High Conservation Value also applies to areas of cultural and religious significance to the local population or areas which are important to meet the basic needs of communities who harvest wild fruits and other products in the forest.

Trees are harvested selectively and in a responsible way. Felling trees and getting the logs out must be done with care in order to minimise their impact. In January 2016, Britvec and his men cut 100 trees per day, one tree per hectare on average.

Antoine Couturier (1973) is IFO’s director responsible for environmental and social company policies and certification. He has studied physical geography and post doc tropical ecology. Like Britvec, he is French. Couturier: ‘Trees must have a Minimum Felling Diameter (MFD), below that we do not fell.’ The MFD’s are included in IFO’s forest management plan. IFO’s MFD’s are 10 to 30 cm higher than the obligatory diameters of the forest law of the Republic of Congo, in order to ensure sufficient forest regrowth during a rotation period of 30 years. But, what is sufficient?

Spurting initially, tropical hardwood trees continue to grow slow. The diameter of the Sapelli grows 0.5 cm to 0.8 cm per year, Wenge 0.8 cm per year, the diameter of the also highly appreciated and famous Ebony grows 0.2 cm per year. If IFO would return to the first zone after 30 years, eligible Sapelli trees would have grown 15 to 24 cm in diameter, Ebony only 6 cm. Therefore, Couturier tells, IFO does not harvest, but keeps a large part of the trees above the minimum diameter. 60% of Wenge and 90% of Ebony above the minimum



diameter are not harvested and left alone. The law in the Republic of Congo in January 2016 only mentions minimum diameters and no maximum diameters. If a logging company were to cut all objective trees above the minimum, the quality of the forest would deteriorate. Many logging companies don’t care. However, IFO operates with a maximum diameter and that is remarkable. IFO will not cut trees with a 2 metre diameter or more, Couturier tells. That means that the biggest and oldest trees are not touched and left alone.

Nevertheless a problem may rise. It has to do with the preference of the international market for only a relative small number of well-known tree species, especially the very popular Sapelli.

I am rather surprised when Britvec tells me that IFO harvests 90 % of the much wanted Sapellis with a diameter between 100 cm and 200 cm in January 2016. Within this diameter range, only the lesser quality Sapellis with twisting

IFO’s concession is home to approximately 70,000 gorillas and 4,000 elephants.

trunks and Sapellis which carry seeds and are protected are not harvested. It makes me wonder what the effect will be. If this would go on, many generations of Sapelli would almost vanish. In the whole north of the Republic of Congo Sapellis are under pressure. The market wants them.

LESSER KNOWN TREE SPECIES Couturier is not worried: ‘Over the whole year 2016 this will level out and the impact will be much less. Since the start of our forest management plan in 2007 about 80 to 85% of eligible Sapellis have been felled. For most other principal species only about 15 to 50% of trees above the minimum diameter have been felled. It is a fact during the first rotation in natural forests that a “bonus” of larger trees is present. Due to the fact that we respect



Architects, project developers and authorities in Europe, the United States and Asia have an important role to play by prescribing timber of Lesser Known Tree Species.

minimum diameters – and ours are higher than required by law – there will be enough trees to harvest in future felling cycles of 30 years. Volume increment will be the same and the harvest of the so-called Lesser Known Tree Species will be added. Our management plan is carried out and respected in such a way that every single species will be present for generations to come.’

Couturier has identified a number of promising Lesser Known Tree Species in the concession. He tells the concession hosts 276 different tree species, a number of which have not even been described yet. IFO plans to harvest 200,000 m³ of timber in 2016, yet this year’s potential of the concession allows a harvest of 350,000 to 400,000 m³, taking Lesser Known Tree Species into account, according to Couturier. Couturier: ‘IFO always cuts much less than could be logged sustainably.’

Couturier is right. Growing demand of Lesser Known Tree Species could release the pressure on well-known tree species. Architects, project developers and authorities in Europe, the United States and Asia have an important role to play to support sustainable forest management in the Congo Basin well into the future, by prescribing timber of Lesser Known Tree Species from FSC-certified forests.

Two days after visiting the tree harvesting zone of 2016, I go and have a look in zone 2009 at my request to see how the forest looks six years after harvest. The road which enters the zone has been closed off by two large logs and laterite heaps, as it should according to FSC-principles and criteria. No car can enter here. It is overgrown with vegetation, more than 1 metre high. I see dung of elephants, a good sign. Then I ask Fulgence Opendzobe and Timothée Epoutangongo, the two men who took me, if we can leave the path and go straight through the closed undergrowth of the forest. It is a bit of an adventure and Timothée cuts our way through with a machete. Looking up I see big trees: the much wanted Azobe, a Sapelli and also Lesser Known Tree Species like Limba and Kanda. There is a lot of light, trees



Measuring a log.



Fruits of the shrub Afromomum. Gorillas love them, they open the fruits with the nails of their fingers.

have been harvested here, but some parts of the concession are less dense than other parts.

On the ground we discover red pointed fruits on light brown roots. They are the size of a thumb of a grown up person and fruits of the shrub Afromomum. Gorillas love them, they open the fruits with the nails of their fingers. So do I, the inside is like a passion fruit, the taste is delicious. Later I come across dung of gorillas. This is a beautiful forest. High up the wind blows through the leaves of the trees. It is a game of shadows and light.



FSC-certified forest management



Protection of wildlife

FSC certification also means that IFO has to look after protection of wildlife in its concession and establish a team of ecoguards who patrol the forest. In the Republic of Congo the forest law demands to contribute to ecoguard teams, however in practice only the certified companies actually do it, according to Couturier. The government recruits, employs and controls the ecoguards who are armed and pays the head of the team, but IFO and its partner in nature conservation, the NGO Wildlife Conservation Society (WCS) pay the salaries of the ecoguards. IFO also pays the mission costs of jeeps and gasoline. In 2014 there were 15 ecoguards, but in 2015 the number doubled to 30 at the request of the Forest Stewardship Council. The ecoguards do more than patrolling the roads. Since hunting for subsistence by the forest communities is allowed six months per year in parts of the concession, the ecoguards inform the population about the law as well.

It is quite a challenge to combat poaching with 30 ecoguards in an area which has the size of more than a quarter of the country of Switzerland. But their presence is important, Richard Malonga, conservationist at WCS and Director of Parc National Nouabalé Ndoki, tells when I meet him in his office in the capital of Brazzaville: 'The ecoguards of IFO contribute to release pressure on wildlife in neighbouring national park Odzala.' Many animal species can be found in IFO's forest concession. All species are represented in good numbers which have not decreased, according to Malonga. Besides forest elephants and gorillas, IFO's forest concession is home to chimpanzees,



Guy Aimé Florent Malanda, head of the government ecoguards in IFO's concession.

‘The ecoguards of IFO contribute to release pressure on wildlife in neighbouring national park Odzala.’

other species of monkey such as the Black-and-white colobus, the De Brazza monkey and the Moustached guenon, leopards, buffalos, antelope like the Sitatunga or Marshbuck, the Blue duiker, the Peter’s duiker and many, many other species. During my visit I saw three of them: forest elephants (a mother and her baby), Blue duikers and what could have been a Moustached guenon.

Things can get pretty tough when combatting poachers in the concession. Guy Aimé Florent Malanda, head of the government ecoguards in IFO’s concession, tells me an impressive story. In the fall of 2015 his ecoguards were after a gang of poachers who used Kalashnikov machine guns to attack the ecoguards. The ecoguards responded by using their own Kalashnikovs. The ecoguards could catch one of the poachers who was wounded in the leg. They confiscated 36 kilograms of ivory.

The pictures of the forest elephants, leopard and Great Blue Turaco have been taken in the concession of IFO. © Thomas Britvec.



FSC-certified forest management

IV Resource efficiency



At the premises of IFO vast piles of many hundreds of logs lay waiting to be processed in the two large sawmills. Frenchman Cody Rabeau (1987), deputy director of the factory and a lover of motorcycles, shows me around. Although he is very young, 28, he has much responsibility. That is what attracts him to work here in Africa. In crowded Europe he would have to be a lot older in most cases. I will not forget the detailed explanation of Rabeau how sawn wood has to be dried. Witnessing the care of a professional for his product is nice.

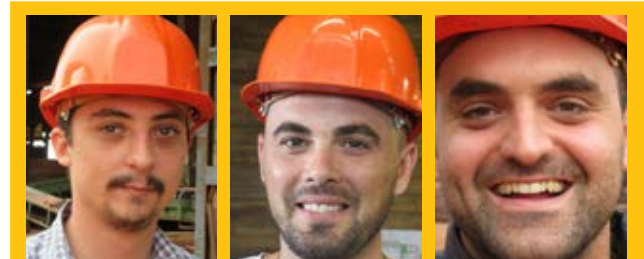
Resource efficiency is important to IFO. Rabeau tells me that residual pieces of wood are used as much as possible, for instance in so-called finger joints. This means that parts of two different pieces of wood are shoved into one another and then fixed. The finger joints may serve as window frames or used for other purposes. Lamellés-collés they are called in French.

The processing of the logs, including the maintenance of machines, administration and transport, is a major operation, involving more than 800 Congolese workers. A small percentage is exported as roundwood, the rest is processed here. Every month 15,000 m3 of timber is sawn. Rabeau, mechanic Miguel Pinto from Portugal, sawmill manager Tommaso Bedei from Italy and their colleagues have to make sure that the sawmills keep operating and contracts with buyers from Europe, Asia and the US are complied with. Sometimes they have to work seven days a week.

SAINT-PETERSBURG I want to talk with Congolese workers without the company management looking over their shoulder. Ferdinand Ndombi (1968) is coordinator in one of the sawmills, who is also in charge of the kilns, huge wood drying chambers. We sit and have a coffee. Ndombi was born in the town of Makoua, right on the equator in the Republic of Congo. To my surprise Ndombi says that he studied forestry in Saint-Petersburg in Russia between 1986 and 1993 just like the current Minister of Forest Economy



Logs on their way to the sawmills at the premises of IFO.



Cody Rabeau

Miguel Pinto

Tommaso Bedei

and Sustainable Development of the Republic of Congo, Henri Djombo. The Republic of Congo maintained close ties with Russia, Cuba and China until the early 90s.

Ndombi has been with IFO since 2005. Previously he worked for the government as head of control of timber exports in the harbour of Point Noire. I ask why he had chosen forestry. 'I have been raised in the forest,' he replies, 'my father was a timber sawer.' Ndombi stresses that it is important to safeguard the forest: 'We must protect it, the animals, the tree species and the balance of biodiversity.' Ndombi continues: 'People go to Paris and take pictures of the Eiffel Tower and the Moulin Rouge. Our identity card is nature, white people come here to see animals. What you see here, is only here.' I ask whether nature is important

Residual pieces of wood are used as much as possible, for instance in so-called finger joints.



Ferdinand Ndombi: ‘People go to Paris and take pictures of the Eiffel Tower and the Moulin Rouge. Our identity card is nature, white people come here to see animals. What you see here, is only here.’



Mechanics at one of the sawmills of IFO. From left to right: Yoka Ondze, Serge Allam, Rock Kabotsa.

because of money. ‘It is not only the money,’ Ndombi replies, ‘it is more than that, for us it means wealth.’

Is working for a company which operates sustainably like IFO a choice? Ndombi: ‘A choice? That’s complicated. It is necessary to work and have a job. I have to sustain my family. If a company would not respect nature and it would be the only company around, I would go and work

for that company, for do I have a choice?’

‘If I would have a choice,’ Ndombi continues, ‘of course I would choose the company which protects nature.’ If IFO stays, would the forest stay, I ask. Ndombi, immediately: ‘*Oui, aucun doute*, yes, without a doubt.’ He adds: ‘If there would be no IFO, there would be no town of Ngombé. That is clear, everybody would leave.’ Then Ndombi says, out of himself: ‘I am proud to work for IFO, it is the leader in the field.’

I ask him if he worries about climate change. Ndombi: ‘Yes, I am worried. I have noticed changes in the rainy season and in the dry season. When the river should rise, it goes down and when it should go down, it rises. Sometimes the rain comes too early, sometimes too late and then we have no maize. Now it has not rained for 45 days in a row.’ I ask whether western countries are responsible. Ndombi avoids a direct answer: ‘That’s for the politicians to decide, everyone is responsible.’

Then Ndombi takes another point of view and adds: ‘We have to live off the forest. I do not agree with radical conservationists who say that we cannot touch the forest. We have to eat and the population grows. It may be necessary to convert part of the forest to agriculture and other land uses.’

RESPECT I find it very understandable what Ndombi says. Food security and ending poverty come first. That’s why FSC-certified forest management is so important. It is carried out with respect for the forest and with respect for the local people, providing forest workers with a decent income to sustain their families and providing other forest inhabitants with opportunities to develop themselves. That is why WWF and Greenpeace support FSC-certified forest management, they were among the founders of the Forest Stewardship Council back in 1994. Well-managed FSC-certified forests can be part of a national land use plan in which agricultural zones are specified as well. Later, after my return to the capital of Brazzaville, Minister Henri Djombo tells me he wants more forests to be FSC-certified.



Visitor from the forest. © U. Binhack / Interholco.



Sawn wood is dried outside and in the kiln, a huge drying chamber.



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.

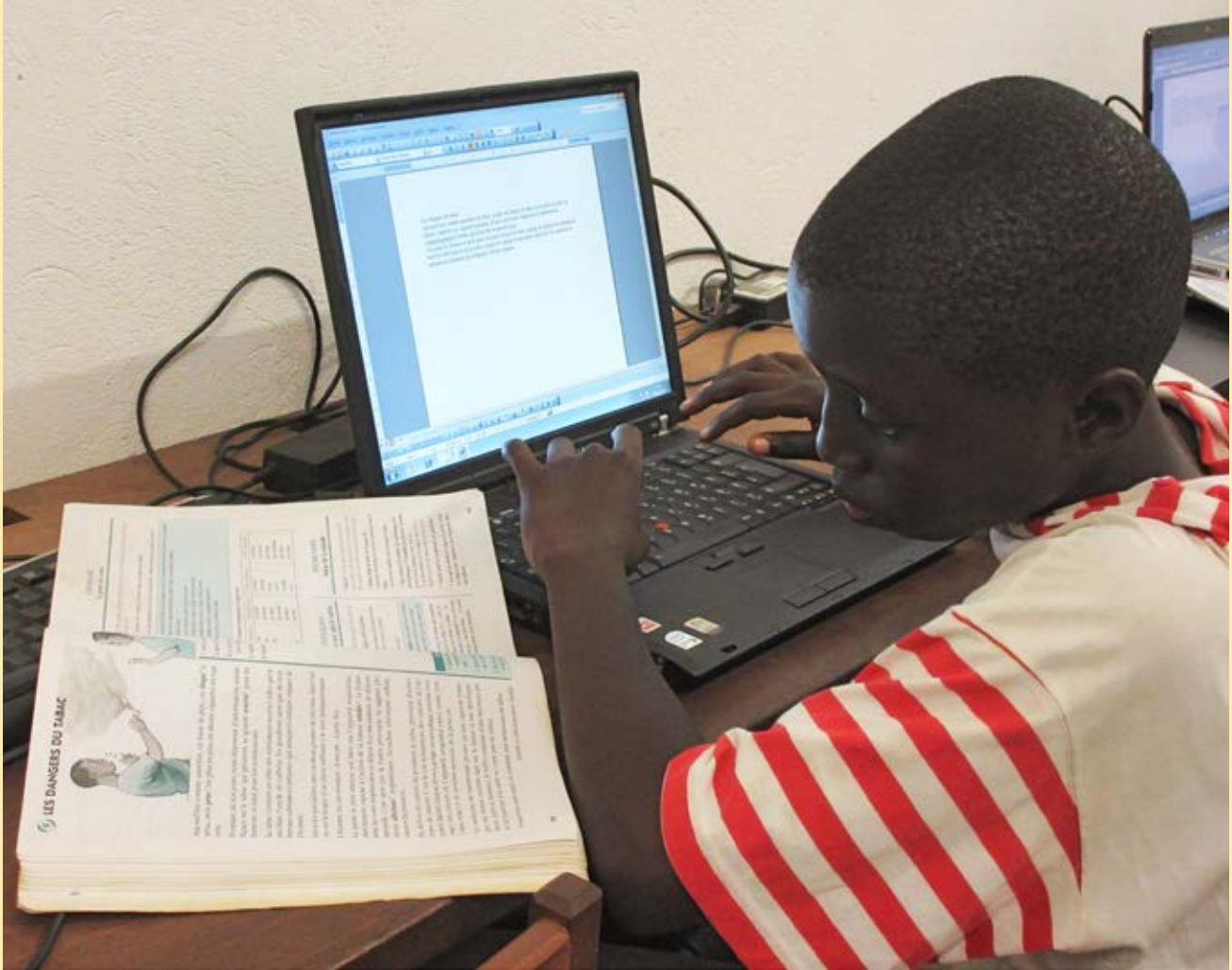
I ask Ambroise whether managing forests in a sustainable way is important. ‘Yes, it is,’ he answers, ‘it is important for our children. When we protect the forest and the young trees, the trees will grow and our children will be able to harvest the forest too. We have to protect wildlife, elephants, 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



A young boy practices Word in the library.



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.



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)

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.

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.

Ulrich Grauert, Chief Executive Officer of Interholco AG, the Swiss based mother company of IFO.



FSC-certified forest management

VI The business case

Ulrich Grauert (1965) from Germany is Chief Executive Officer of Interholco AG, the mother company of IFO. Interholco, an international producer and supplier of timber based in Switzerland, operates globally and was created back in 1962. Interholco still cherishes its original values, Grauert says: ‘A timber company is responsible for its workers and for ecology. Long-term thinking was and is very important. In fact, the aims of our company today are similar to the aims of the Forest Stewardship Council. This means that forest management has to be economically successful and ecologically and socially sustainable. For us, getting FSC certification was a natural thing to do. Certification serves as a good structure to ensure continuity of our company values in the long-term.’

FSC certification of the forest-concession of IFO has been an investment. Has the state of the forest in your concession benefitted from FSC certification?

Grauert: ‘Interholco serves the interests of people and the planet through FSC certification. By only harvesting 1 tree on the equivalent of 2 football fields, our wood products give value to the forest. This allows gorillas, elephants and many other animals and plants to thrive in their unique habitat. And the forest regenerates on its own. We have also managed to eliminate mining permits from the forest concession area. Fortunately, they were only

dormant, but still existing. The forest is better safeguarded now for generations to come. The world needs healthy forests, for clean water and rain. Just to give an example, the rain regimes that are so badly needed in Eastern Africa originate in the Congo Basin. Everything is connected.’

What are the benefits of FSC certification for your company, organisation-wise and economically?

Grauert: ‘Behind FSC certification is a global community, collectively driving forest protection. Together, FSC

Behind FSC certification is a global community, collectively driving forest protection.

members shape the criteria, procedures and regulations that allow independent auditors to personally check that forests are well protected. This gives a strong back-bone to our operations. At the same time, it provides a forest of solutions, aligned with the UN Sustainable Development Goals: decent work and economic growth, reduced inequalities, climate protection, respect and protection

of life on land, peace, justice and strong institutions. Concretely, our teams involve local communities in the process, giving them access to economic benefits and more. Schools, medical facilities and a library are open to thousands of people. FSC allows us to show that prosperity and purpose coexist. With this in mind, we have launched a breakthrough Alliance, looking for like-minded partners who are ready to invest in safeguarding African forests. Our Sustainability Report 2020 on the Interholco website provides more information.’

Do you perceive market preference for your company because your products are FSC-certified?

Grauert: ‘Markets are volatile, trends come and go. One thing is sure: end consumers are increasingly eco-friendly

End consumers are increasingly eco-friendly in their choices.

in their choices. Take climate change, economic uncertainty and social inequality: nobody wants timber from destructed forests! The world is too connected, for those who endanger others to get away with it. The FSC seal gives peace of mind. When we tell customers that our products respect people and the forest, we do not just *say* it, we engage an independent third party to *certify* it. Architects and designers worldwide are challenged to build greener cities, for rising populations. Buildings should not only be higher, but also resilient to the increasingly frequent natural catastrophes. FSC-certified wood meets this challenge. It is a safe to use as well as eco-friendly material, to build the future we all want.’

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