

RAINFOREST FOUNDATION UK

SECURING LANDS, SUSTAINING LIVES

REAL-TIME COMMUNITY-BASED FOREST MONITORING: CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES

David Young, June 2015

REPORT SUMMARY

This briefing presents the main findings from a desk study and consultation covering nine countries[1], conducted for The Rainforest Foundation UK (RFUK) in April 2015, which presented the issues and opportunities around the organisation of real-time forest monitoring that takes advantage of new technologies available on smartphones and similar portable multimedia devices. It follows the successful technical testing in Cameroon of 'off-network' real-time community-based forest monitoring by RFUK and its local partner FODER, details of which can be found at http://monitor.mappingforrights.org/.

The study covers five essential considerations in any further development or implementation of this kind of technology. Each of these are described, along with the main findings.

FINDINGS

STRUCTURES AND METHODS

How civil society-led independent forest monitoring (CS-IFM)[2] might be organised, for example in terms of communities, local and national civil society organisations (CSOs).

The use of smartphone technology provides the possibility of three distinct advantages over previous monitoring tools: the multimedia nature; real-time efficient transmission of data; and the ability to collect large numbers of cases rapidly and over a large area. It is important to consider the methods, opportunities, and challenges of these three functions separately.

At present there appears to be a significant gap in the views of CSOs interviewed about the ability of community monitors to do more than make denouncements / send alerts, and the potential for real-time monitoring by community monitors to produce complete, useful and effective monitoring reports. (This partly relates to the issue of data verification, which is addressed in more detail below).

In Peru and Guyana, rights-based CS-IFM does not primarily seek to report denouncements to a state authority and expect a response. In Uganda, devolution of monitoring, reporting and follow-up enforcement is at the core of the structure: anyone can use any type of phone to make a denouncement. Furthermore there is no central NGO playing a moderating role – denouncements are passed automatically to the relevant (local) forest authority, police, journalists and CSOs.

A strategic choice exists between community monitoring as primarily a 'citizen reporter' or communication tool, where individual cases, their veracity and subsequent enforcement matter less, or an IFM tool, where it becomes important that every case is valid, rigorously documented, and tracked to assess the enforcement.

MOTIVATION AND INCENTIVES

Why should forest communities and CSOs devote time to independent forest monitoring (IFM)? Including rights-based and ethical drivers as well as more direct financial rewards.

The motivation and incentives for any monitoring, documenting, denunciation and/or advocacy work are a complex mix of individual and social values about environment and community; cash income / reward; leadership, public profile and aspirations.

In Peru and Guyana forest monitoring is firmly rooted in the customary rights of indigenous peoples, and the imperative to identify and protect their rights is a strong motivation. As with RFUK's MappingForRights project, most observations are not related to infractions or law enforcement, but to the community's need to know and protect their resources and territory. In contrast CS-IFM initiatives in DRC and potentially Liberia are closely linked to the community's role in social agreements with economic actors, on the basis that they might be motivated to help protect concession areas if they can really see the benefit share they have a right to.

Uganda has the clearest example of direct cash incentives, where rewards of about US$34 (equivalent to about two weeks income for a rural Ugandan household) are provided for information leading to the confiscation of a lorry carrying illegal timber. This tackles a small but easily detected aspect of illegality and serves to bring the widest possible range of stakeholders into the effort; notably, a local government is providing the cash rewards. A scheme that provides quick, tangible rewards can form the basis for maintaining momentum to tackle more complex rule of law aspects of the sector.

Few conditional cash transfer systems have been applied to the forest sector and, in the words of one expert consulted "much more could be done – including the use of mobile phone cash delivery – and the forest/climate change/FLEGT community is very unaware of the advance in the social protection, health and education sectors".

---

1. *The study focussed on Cameroon, but drew examples of similar initiatives from Central Africa Republic, Democratic Republic of Congo, Guyana, Indonesia, Liberia, Peru, Republic of Congo and Uganda*
2. *The study used CS-IFM as an abbreviation for independent forest monitoring conducted by civil society organisations or communities*

VERIFICATION

How data quality, trust and collaborative efforts between different civil society actors, as well as improvements in skills and confidence, can improve the professionalism of CS-IFM and the credibility of reports.

Denouncements are treated with greater scepticism if they (a) come from less articulate sources, (b) come from those 'with an axe to grind', (c) name, shame or over-claim, making them impolite, undiplomatic or open to legal challenge, and (d) lack incontrovertible evidence.

In Peru and Guyana verification is more of a political exercise where community leaders do not dispute the information from monitors, but need to decide how best to use it in both internal decision-making and external advocacy. In Uganda the system assesses the responsiveness of the forest authority in terms of how many of the alerts were acted on at all. In effect this is direct pressure to improve enforcement without labouring on verification of individual cases. At the same time, if a large proportion of the alerts were unfounded this would in turn pressure the CS-IFM system to improve the quality of its work.

In the nascent CS-IFM work in Congo Basin there's a presumption that more established local or national NGOs will do this verification but, if – as can be expected from real-time, smartphone monitoring – the volume of denouncements increases significantly, more people, closer to the forest will need to develop the ability to document an infraction to a high standard of evidence and precision. Furthermore, there is always more evidence that could potentially be collected, but there comes a point where someone has to take responsibility for presenting the data gathered thus far.

Often the evidence gathered and rigorous legal analysis are less a linear sequence of observation–denunciation–verification and more a synthesis of different data from different sources (local and national), built up in a complimentary fashion. Thus over time CS-IFM may look less like there's a cadre of observers and a cadre of verifiers, and more like many players who all have the confidence to speak truth to power.

ENFORCEMENT

How the work of CS-IFM, in particular in combination with real-time and smartphone technologies, can improve the responsiveness for forest authorities and others with the power to enhance governance.

In one sense, more than a decade of IFM has increased transparency – simply by virtue of documenting and publishing cases – yet this has not led to a comparable level of remedial action by government authorities.

Those infractions most easily documented by community monitors are those that it should be possible to resolve locally, as often the evidence is simple to collect and indisputable. However, local level authorities feel unable or are unwilling to act. Alternatively, more complex infractions, that would potentially expose the most senior officials and politicians, do not readily lead themselves to community monitoring.

They require detailed legal analysis of evidence from multiple sources – as well as pressure from international actors (NGOs or donors) and levers such as FLEGT – if they stand any chance of success.

If community monitoring is considered primarily a citizen reporting tool, this kind of reporting on performance may need to operate at a national level, as pinpointing failures by individual local control agents to keep companies in line puts them at risk, as these officials are often powerless to control illegal actions authorised by their superiors. Furthermore, there is the risk that pressure to enforce results in stronger suppression of small-scale non-formal logging rather than of major corporations acting illegally.

The initiative in Guyana hopes to differentiate (preferably through software algorithms) between that which can instantly be uploaded to the public Internet and more politically sensitive cases that need more careful handling.

The Comité de Lecture function in IFM in Congo Basin was originally designed to avoid 'blaming the messenger', but if community monitoring takes a more citizen reporting approach, this becomes less of an issue – it's more 'what do the people think of us' and less 'who's trying to be a policeman'.

VALUE ADDED TO FLEGT

The added-value of CS-IFM, in particular to forest law enforcement, governance and trade (FLEGT) initiatives that provide a clear articulation of what legal forest operations entail.

One entry-point within FLEGT for CS-IFM is the Independent Auditor, who does not necessarily have the resources to be paying continuous attention to the forest sector, but makes one or two audits a year. There is potential for audit reports to give weight to evidence presented by civil society, and for this to increase the relevance of and respect for CS-IFM in between audits. Civil society can also provide a mechanism for timely monitoring of the implementation of corrective actions the Independent Auditor recommends, rather than a hiatus between audits.

Similarly, the entities established to oversee implementation of the VPA (Joint Implementation Committee, national sub-committee, national multi-stakeholder forums etc.) all provide venues for CS-IFM to engage and to coordinate, systematise and professionalise how this is done. The top-level VPA governance structures include national governments and international representatives, so publishing data on illegalities in a timely way and in an appropriate format should leverage this political attention to the issue.

Credible information on illegalities does not need to wait for the governments of the countries concerned to take action, but can inform the market directly. The 2010 European Union Timber Regulation (and similar new legislation in the US and Australia) is an opportunity for civil society to provide information to importers when conducting their due diligence checks – and to present it in a way that they will find useful. In addition, if the European, US or Australian authorities want to investigate possible failures to comply with the law by any importer, they too will be able to conclude that this information was indisputably available, pertinent and useable.

Real-time monitoring facilitates the rapid collection of very small pieces of information, such as 'do you have a copy of your social agreement?' Such 'flash info-gathering' events can be timed to coincide with FLEGT-related events, and show the extent of failures to meet VPA access-to-information obligations.



CONCLUSION

There are many real-time forest monitoring initiatives in development, from simple SMS use in Uganda to more sophisticated scripts and use of icons to assist forest community members with low literacy skills. There are growing calls for a community of practice to improve sharing of ideas, experiences and applications – in the technical software sense; in the way in which people use this to collect, analyse and share information; and in the ways in which it can be applied to meet different objectives.

The spectrum of objectives spans a very close relationship with forest law enforcement agencies (Republic of Congo, DRC) with minimal contact (Guyana), and is a key strategic issue for any initiative: should any particular real-time community monitoring system adopt the somewhat a linear denouncement-verification-report-advocacy approach, or should it look primarily within its own community, as the ears and eyes of community leadership to aid political decision-making. Should it aim directly at demand-side measures, bringing risky sources of timber to the attention of international buyers? Or should it emphasise its difference from IFM, and instead be presented it in terms of citizen reporting, communicating people's sense of the performance of forest law enforcement without dwelling on individual cases, the detailed documentation or the long process of writing, verifying, reviewing and publishing.

There are some key functions where national NGOs, with their oversight over the full range of local activities, will remain best-placed to perform. A national expert IFM team could (a) provide training, systemisation and quality control to innumerable other monitors; (b) conduct more complex and longer investigations; and (c) track the recommendations from all IFM reports to see that they are implemented.

It is clear that wider implementation of community-based monitoring could greatly increase the number of denouncements, alerts, and reports being generated. These are likely to be limited in detail or legal analysis, but numerous (Uganda has recorded 700 alerts in eight months) and geographically dispersed. It should be possible to deliberately document the same infractions across the forest estate, demonstrating a systemic problem, and to collect this information simultaneously from many sources. This could help to show patterns of enforcement or perhaps more importantly, non-enforcement, which would provide valuable evidence for failures in the enforcement system. Thus, information management will become increasingly critical, and packaging the material in ways that policy-makers, international media, and funders find engaging will help to have an impact, and should be facilitated by new technology.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Test the system in several different 'live' situations in different legal and institutional enforcement conditions, to explore the issues and options set out in the study.

» Ensure that any next steps are in close consultation with local civil society. One way to do this efficiently is to form an Innovation Team comprising leading individual local CSOs, community members and notably the community mappers already involved with RFUK projects. The inclusion of a forest official and a donor involved in the VPA would also be beneficial.

» Such an Innovation Team should also look at issues of ownership of and access to the database at the heart of the real-time system, and at how the system can play a part in the continuous improvement of the community monitors' work.

» Support an international community of practice, both on the smartphone technology and on the five themes of this study. This research has contributed to a growing sense, amongst civil society leaders involved in IFM, that a community of practice is emerging.

» In consultation with local partners, break down the real-time, multimedia and multiple monitors factors that community-based monitoring using new technology entails, and examine each separately for the opportunities and constraints they pose. For example, real-time will lend itself to smaller, more frequent reporting whereas multimedia data collection is more applicable to data-heavy evidence and raising the profile of the more intractable issues.

» Assess the current structure of data collection, treatment, reporting, advocacy and lobbying against the risk of creating a false dichotomy between observers and verifiers, and explore ways of less linear and more collaborative work between CSOs.

» Consider mobile money systems for efficient payments or 'rewards' for reporting, and ensure a consistent approach amongst NGOs and other project implementers towards payments for community monitoring work. However, recognise that for some groups the justification for such monitoring is strongly linked to territorial protection and cultural/ideological values.

» Develop a mechanism for two-way communication with the smartphone App and associated hub database, so that communities (not just those involved in RFUK projects) can benefit from access to information that often doesn't leave the capital city.

» Explore further technical developments to allow more flexible use of the smartphone scripts to allow for a wider range of incident reports/investigation results to be processed through them. New technology should support the open-ended nature of IFM, not reduce it to a checklist.

» Assess the potential for data management systems linked to incident report data, for example using algorithms to aid sensitivity and prioritisation (i.e. straightforward and more local infractions are transmitted automatically to the authorities, and more complex issues are sent to a national expert IFM team). Develop data templates to assist with collation, analysis and presentation of data from different sources. Ensure, however, that any interactive publications are robust enough to be accessible on slow Internet connections.

» Explore ways to make real-time and multimedia information on infractions directly available to international timber markets, in formats that traders and trade regulatory authorities will find useful.





RAINFOREST FOUNDATION UK

SECURING LANDS, SUSTAINING LIVES

The Rainforest Foundation UK
Registered Charity No. 1138287

233a Kentish Town Road, London
NW5 2JT, United Kingdom.

+44 (0) 20 7485 0193
info@rainforestuk.org

www.rainforestfoundationuk.org
www.mappingforrights.org