

STORIES OF CHANGE

Organisation Development
Support to African Civil
Society Organisations in the
Congo Basin



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Prepared by



Expanding Horizons. Enriching Lives.

Well Grounded provides organisation development (OD) support to African civil society organisations (CSOs) that work on community rights and the protection of forests and natural resources. This series of success stories is designed to share our experiences of OD with CSOs, identifying factors that we consider have been important in enabling those CSOs to become more effective and to have more impact. We hope that our learning can be of use to others who are facing similar challenges. We also hope that these success stories highlight the importance of investing in organisations as well as in projects.

BECOME AWARE OF WHO YOU ARE TO ACT ON YOUR OWN SCALE

Maison de l'Enfant, et de la Femme Pygmée (MEFP), CAR

Key organisational development issues that MEFP and Well Grounded have worked on together:

- Strategy and Planning
- Participatory approach & advocacy
- Financial, administrative and management systems support
- Development of proposals

BACKGROUND

MEFP came into being on 15 October 2000 in response to the dramatic poor living conditions of the indigenous hunter-gatherer peoples of the tropical rainforests, commonly known as “Pygmies” and who are called “indigenous people” in this report. The indigenous people are minority population of the Central African Republic’s (CAR) residing in forest zones. A number of studies have highlighted the marginalisation of these peoples from Central African society in spite of the CAR having signed and ratified various international human rights instruments and certain specific related texts that particularly enshrine the rights to consultation, to exercise of cultural rights and the implementation of measures aimed at reducing poverty that directly affects indigenous peoples. The founders of MEFP has been working with the indigenous people, providing support for women and children in particular for a number of years before they established MEFP. The aim of MEFP is to further the social, economic and cultural well-being of indigenous people in general to combat marginalisation. MEFP’s vision focuses specifically on the indigenous peoples of the CAR, but does not exclude the local Bantu communities that also share the forests.

The organisational structure of MEFP is made up of three main parts: the General Assembly, which is the deliberative body, the Steering Committee, which is the body responsible for vision and direction, and the Executive Coordination, the body responsible for implementing actions planned by the organisation. There have been change since the military coup in March 2013, not on the organisational structure but on the number of staff: MEFP used to have 22 and currently only 8 staff working on full time.

Before the war erupted in 2013, MEFP had worked on a number of projects, such as a participatory mapping project (supported by Rainforest Foundation UK [RF-UK]), Climate Change/Reduction Emissions from Deforestation and Degradation (REDD) – coordinating CSOs feedback on the Readiness Preparation Proposal (RPP) (supported by RF-UK and FERN), Access to Justice for indigenous communities through training lawyers (supported by RF-UK funded by DFID).

MEFP was badly affected by the March 2013 military coup. The staff was targeted, some staff and their families were killed and others were forced to flee. Funding was interrupted by donors. DFID had been a significant contributor, but stopped funding work in CAR. There was some minimal funding from a prominent Cameroonian, CSO, Forêts et Développement Rural (FODER) and through sub-contracted work as well as from Well Grounded (WG) and RF-UK.

During the conflict, the MEFP coordination left the country and was managing some level of project activities remotely from Cameroon with a few staff who stayed behind to continue working with some of their target forest communities. In 2017, the MEFP coordination came back to CAR once the conflict settled and the organisation has resumed fully its work. However, the organisation is still adjusting in order to ensure its continued survival in a changing environment.

COLLABORATION WITH WELL GROUNDED

Well Grounded and MEFP have worked together since 2010 and their collaboration did not stop during the conflict as WG continued to provide some support to the MEFP coordination, which was working remotely from Cameroon. WG provided support to the development of MEFP's contingency plan in October 2013 in Yaoundé. This helped the organisation review its projects so as to adapt them to the crisis, maintain visibility and continue to operate strategically. WG provided remote support from Yaoundé after the onset of the war, after the return of its senior staff to CAR and continues to support MEFP today.



OUTCOME OF SUPPORT RECEIVED FROM WG

STRATEGY AND PLANNING

MEFP had support from WG in 2012 in carrying out an organisational analysis and developing a strategic plan. However, implementation of the plan was halted due to the outbreak of civil war in CAR (2012). In March 2016, as conditions became more stable, WG met with the MEFP coordination team in Yaoundé to re-establish their collaboration. Support priorities were identified and actions/next steps agreed. At the time collaboration restarted, much of MEFP's previous funding had stopped due to the war; MEFP's activities at the time were minimal and the organisation was losing ground in a competitive environment due to limited resources.

Leadership was concentrated on the family members of the founders with remaining staff floating in and out on a project-by-project basis; when there is no funding, staff leave and work elsewhere. As the situation in CAR improved and staff was back in the country from Cameroon in 2017, collaboration between the two organisations reinvigorated. WG conducted a three-day workshop in May 2017 with the staff of MEFP to analyse its organisational strengths and weaknesses, define vision, mission, values, and put in place a framework for future collaboration between WG and MEFP.

Following a second three-day workshop in October 2017, facilitated by WG, a strategy for MEFP's programme of work was developed, setting out objectives, strategic intervention areas and activities for the next five years as well as an organisational structure. MEFP now has a document that it can share with partners and potential partners to better communicate its goals and objectives.

MEFP has been able to re-define clearly **four areas of intervention**:

- Promotion of indigenous culture;
- Education and health;
- Promotion of micro development projects; and
- Sustainable management of resources and their environment.

As a result of this strategic thinking and focusing its work, MEFP is increasing its credibility influencing government as well as other entities. They have influenced the University in Bangui to include in their curriculum, governance and climate change themes, and some departments, such as Departments of Sociology and Rural Development have started to integrate these themes and MEFP is now solicited for talks and lectures at the university.

PARTICIPATORY APPROACH & ADVOCACY

WG has helped MEFP with its OD process, including developing a participatory approach in working with communities, and strengthening its advocacy through engaging better with other CSOs in the country. MEFP considers WG's approach straight-forward and very client-led: not dictating to its clients but working with them to understand their objectives and explore ways and means of achieving these; MEFP finds this efficient, and appreciates the non-prescriptive approach. MEFP has been inspired by WG's approach of working in a participatory and respectful manner, and has been able to replicate this in their work with forest communities. During the implementation of the project funded by EU on communities' involvement in FLEGT VPA process in 2012, in which WG supported in the proposal development, MEFP has been able to use a participatory approach with the communities. MEFP also works with other CSOs at a platform level and encourages them to adopt the same approach and values.

As Jerome Sitamon, the Coordinator explains:

“The way we have worked with communities changed considerably due to the way WG has worked with us. While other organisations come with their agenda, WG facilitates and respects our principles, and does not prescribe solutions, but places trust in us to make good decisions. We then have tried to work with communities in listening more to them to understand better their challenges and help them identify the solutions. This has made great changes in the communities' confidence to negotiate with the municipal authorities on the share of forest taxes. This was the greatest achievement”.

- Through the advocacy work it has carried out, MEFP has been able to ensure the participation of forest communities in meetings on the management of municipal budgets; the latter are heavily dependent on forest taxes collected from timber logging companies. This work was carried out within the project related to FLEGT VPA implemented by MEFP between 2011 and 2012. MEFP conducted training and sensitisation of forest communities, including indigenous groups living in the Lobaye Prefecture to raise their awareness of their responsibilities and rights vis-à-vis logging companies, highlighting the importance of their participation in the municipal budget meetings. MEFP's project staff have facilitated and linked community representatives from more than 10 villages with the municipal authorities. Following its engagement and advocacy work, the principle of 'Participation' has been agreed by the Municipality of Lobaye Prefecture, and communities have been able to participate in meetings ever since. As a result of their participation, indigenous and local forest communities from Gambondie and Grima villages have benefited through the construction of a school, equipped with benches, by the timber company operating in the region, as part of its social responsibility. While this was obtained while the project was running before the conflict, it is not clear what other benefits the communities continued to get as MEFP coordination left the country during the conflict and has not been able to monitor this. This is one of the areas MEFP would like to monitor in the future.
- MEFP has also been campaigning for communities, including indigenous groups, to have their rights to forests – in particular community forestry – recognised. Prior to the civil war in CAR, MEFP had planned to work with two communities, one in the South West and another in the South East of the country, and had started to mobilise communities and carry out preparatory work to establish community forests. They had also developed a manual for Community Forestry. However, the process has been blocked by the Ministry of Forests, and with the civil war ongoing most of MEFP's activities were suspended. Since the end of the civil war, WG has been helping MEFP to structure its advocacy plan and the way it undertakes advocacy and collaborates with other CSOs.

WG facilitated a workshop on synergy within civil society, which has encouraged MEFP to strengthen its engagement with civil society in its advocacy work to put pressure on the Ministry of Forests and unblock community forestry processes using techniques learnt through the work with WG. The new Minister of Forests has now given his authorisation to continue the work on community forestry with two communities living in the South-West (around Moloku and Bomango). MEFP has therefore started to carry out preliminary work to re-sensitise communities.

FINANCIAL, ADMINISTRATIVE AND MANAGEMENT SYSTEMS' SUPPORT

WG has also provided support to MEFP in improving its administrative and financial systems, in particular on internal financial controls, putting in place a cash flow system and improving fund management. The key supports provided are:

- Updating of some of the accounting management tools: cash management system, payment system, cash notebooks for various projects;
- Classification of banking documents; a report has been prepared to help in the implementation of the financial systems set up.
- Training on project financial management in particular on the European Union funded projects;
- Support in M & E and monitoring the financial management of the project on the FLEGT-VPA project;
- Administrative: WG helped MEFP (in 2012) to carry out its first organisational analysis, the first recommendation of which was to start improving administrative systems when the military-political crisis started in CAR in 2013;
- Funded the training of the MEFP staff members evacuated to Cameroon during the crisis, in management, particularly on issues of time management and priorities. The Coordinator, the Administrative and Financial Director, and a project manager from the MEFP were the beneficiaries of these training sessions. These trainings took place between 2014 and 2015 in Yaoundé, Cameroon.

- Updating Finally, WG facilitated the organisation of a workshop on organisational management in times of crisis to help MEFP develop a strategy for the remote management of its activities as the main coordinators were in exile in Cameroon.

According to the MEFP Coordinator, "...the different accounting documents are now better organised and facilitate the production of financial reports, and the managerial skills of the MEFP staff have also improved thanks to WG".

DEVELOPMENT OF PROPOSALS

WG supported in the drafting of a first MEFP project proposal in 2012 which was submitted to the European Union, and this was successful. The Project, "Promouvoir la participation des communautés locales et autochtones résident dans la Préfecture de la Lobaye à la mise en œuvre de l'APV/FLEGT", was implemented. Its objective was to strengthen good governance in the management of forest resources through promoting participation of local and indigenous communities residing in the Prefecture of Lobaye in the implementation of FLEGT VPA in the CAR.

The project started to make some difference in the lives of people in terms of their participation in the policy process as mentioned earlier (under sub-section on participatory approach and advocacy) but came to an end in September 2013 due to the war. In 2017, WG supported MEFP to draft another proposal, which was submitted to FAO FLEGT. Although the concept note was selected, the proposal was not successful. MEFP stated that they have learned from WG a great deal in preparing proposals which will help them in being successful in raising funds in the future.



MOST SIGNIFICANT CHANGE

- According to the MEFP Coordinator, the Most Significant Change brought through WG's support is in making them aware of their strengths and inculcating huge confidence in their organisation and themselves, and also in helping them to think and plan their work strategically, and be more focused after having gone through the crisis during the conflict.
- The confidence is translated into being more proactive in their advocacy work as well as in initiating a few projects after the conflict. MEFP is now working on a project funded by FAO FLEGT (AGIR) on the effects of non-timber activities, such as commercial agriculture, mining, etc., on the forests. This is now in its 2nd year. They are also working as part of a regional project on "Defenders of Environment" (continuation of the project on violations of human rights of vulnerable persons supported by 'Avocat sans frontières') and in the consortium project, the CoNGOs, funded by DFID.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

WG's support has been critical in making MEFP regain its confidence after so many years of working remotely due to the conflict in CAR. Not only its support has been highly appreciated during formative years as well as working remotely from Cameroon, but the re-establishment of their collaboration has been key in its current viability and confidence. MEFP has understood that it needs to evolve from a personality-led organisation into one with a proper structure and clear functions, and a team working effectively together. This has also resulted in implementing a rotating system to substitute for the role of Coordinator in his absence.

FACTORS OF SUCCESS

- The importance of an organisation being aware of its strength and confident as without that an organisation cannot fulfil its strategic objectives. This has been critical in MEFP regaining to some extent the lost years during the conflict, and more importantly becoming aware of its capacities/strengths and being able to negotiate with other actors, such as government ministries, donors, and Universities with more confidence.
- The importance of improving the financial, monitoring and management systems as well as managerial skills of the staff which have enabled the organisation to prioritise its interventions and clearly define them;
- The awareness of the Steering Committee and the Coordination of the MEFP of the weaknesses of the organisation and their commitment to work to bring about change after 18 years of existence;
- The availability and commitment of staff members to participate in the various revitalisation processes of the organisation and staff feeling as co-owners of the organisation and taking initiatives for its promotion that was not the case before;
- The diligent and efficient participation of staff members and leadership of the MEFP in all the services offered by WG ;
- The opportunity to have Well Grounded committed to the organisational development of CSOs in the CONGO Basin.

