

ORGANISATION DEVELOPMENT

# **SUCCESS STORIES**

## **STRUCTURE, STRATEGY AND DIVERSITY**

SUPPORTING THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE PLATEFORME  
POUR LA GESTION DURABLE DES FORETS (PGDF), REPUBLIC  
OF CONGO (ROC)



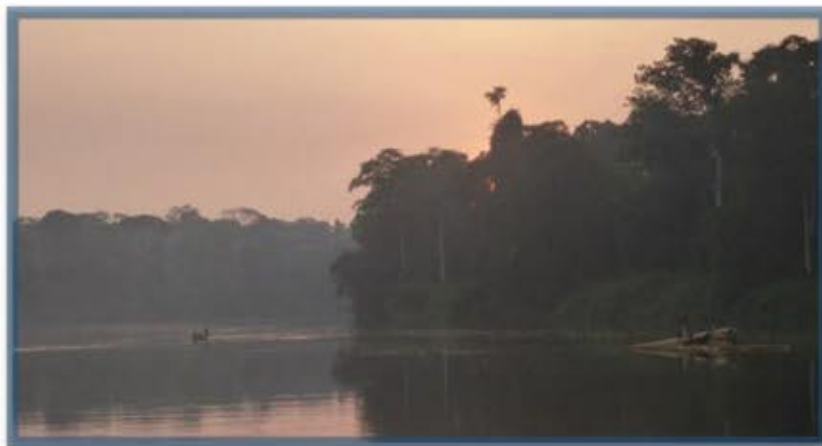


Key **OD ISSUES** that the PGDF and Well Grounded have worked on together :

- I. Member's capacity.
- II. Structure and internal processes
- III. Strategic planning
- IV. Diversity and inclusion

## BACKGROUND

The PGDF is a network of CSOs that work on forest governance and the rights of local and indigenous communities in the RoC. Members of the PGDF originally came together when the Congolese government was negotiating a Voluntary Partnership Agreement (VPA) with the European Union on Forest Law Enforcement, Governance and Trade (FLEGT), so that they could participate in and influence the negotiations. The network had substantial success in the negotiations, using the space as an opportunity to engage in legislative reform and to get indigenous rights and community forestry into the national conversation and onto the statute books. Since that time, the network has continued to follow the VPA process, and it has been active in trying to influence the development of forest policy and legislation in the RoC, always with an eye to the rights of forest communities. The PGDF has come to be recognised as a key civil society actor in processes dealing with forest governance and the rights of local and indigenous communities.



The members of the PGDF are spread across all 10 departments (provinces) of the RoC and range from smaller voluntary groups that take practical environmental action at a local level, to larger CSOs with permanent paid staff that operate at a national level. Members organise themselves at the departmental level: members in each department delegate individuals (focal points) to participate and represent them in national-level decision making. There is a small PGDF Coordination team, made up of people based in Brazzaville (the political capital) who are elected by the membership. Although the PGDF has a broad membership and agreed structures and systems, it has consciously chosen never to register itself as a formal organisation: each time the subject has come up, the members have chosen to keep the benefits of flexibility and reactivity that an informal structure can have. .



## COLLABORATION WITH WELL GROUNDED

The PGDF and Well Grounded first started working together in 2011, in response to the PGDF members' realisation that the network was not as strong as it could be. For its first couple of years of existence, the PGDF (which was formed in response to the VPA negotiations) had a clear focus and mandate: to ensure that community rights and improvements in forest governance were central in the VPA agreement. However, once the agreement had been negotiated, it became harder for the PGDF members to assert themselves as a counterweight. They had one place on the VPA Joint Implementation Committee, but less space to influence the Ministry of Water and Forests. At the same time, discussions started in the RoC on Reducing Emissions from Deforestation and Forest Degradation (REDD). The REDD process, which operated in a very different way from the VPA negotiations, generated a lot of conflict and confusion that created problems for the PGDF: it led to the creation of another platform (CACOREDD), of which PGDF is a member, which contributed to the PGDF losing visibility within the REDD process.



At that time, the PGDF had many members, both in the departments and in Brazzaville, but nobody in the network was entirely sure who was a member and whether all the Congolese CSOs that might be interested in and benefit from membership had clear information from the PGDF about how to officially become a member. Members based in Brazzaville tended to be more active, more involved in PGDF activities and better informed about what was going on in the sector at the national and international levels, and there was a disconnect between that action and the day-to-day work of members on the ground. Indeed, the network as a whole was not necessarily aware of what members in the departments outside of Brazzaville were doing, and some people in those departments felt that their concerns and priorities were not necessarily treated with the same attention.



# OD ISSUE I

## MEMBER'S CAPACITY

After an organisational diagnostic was carried out as part of a project called "Strengthening the capacities of NGOs/Associations to monitor the implementation of the VPA," which was financed by the European Commission and implemented by a PGDF member organisation, AZUR Développement, the PGDF undertook the following activities in collaboration with Well Grounded:

- A. Identification of Congolese organisations across the country actively working on issues relating to forests, the environment, human rights, and community rights.
- B. Participatory assessments of all the organisations identified, exploring their strengths and areas for improvement.
- C. Delivery of a series of workshops for all organisations identified and assessed about the project cycle and proposal writing, as a basis for the participating CSOs to develop applications for a small grants initiative (see below).
- D. Financing of a small grants programme for a limited number of PGDF member organisations. The goal was to support these members to develop their skills, competencies and knowledge of forest governance through the development and delivery of micro projects with communities. The programme involved a simple application process, with selection based on agreed criteria (including criteria to ensure that members in the departments were included), and the provision of support and advice to grantees during project implementation on issues such as financial management, monitoring and evaluation, and project reporting.
- E. Final evaluation and review, including analysis by the members of the strengths and areas for growth of the PGDF as a whole. This informed the next stage of the work between the PGDF and Well Grounded.



AZUR Développement managed the project overall, and Well Grounded's role was to help with design and delivery where appropriate. By the end, a number of PGDF members had had good experience with developing and reporting on projects and, by engaging with the process, had improved communications among themselves and with the PGDF Coordination team. AZUR Développement also succeeded, under difficult circumstances, in managing EC funding, which is often a major barrier for national organisations. That said, there were some challenges along the way. Perhaps most difficult were the power relationships between the different actors, all linked with personal interests and decision making. In light of this, the PGDF and Well Grounded decided that the next step was to tackle directly the challenges of the structure and functioning of the network as a whole



# OD ISSUE II

## STRUCTURE AND INTERNAL PROCESSES

Work on the network structure and functioning began with a return to the departments to help members there identify what they hoped for from the PGDF and how they wanted it to work. Well Grounded and the PGDF Coordination team worked together on a series of departmental consultations that included some interesting and thoughtful discussions about the added value of coming together in a network, as well as what was realistic for a network and its members to expect from each other. These discussions were critical in clarifying the objectives and the role of the network, something that had not been clear previously for some members.

From these departmental consultations came a series of ideas and recommendations about how the PGDF should work as a whole. They covered all aspects of an organisation, from clarifying who could be members and how they could join, identifying who should do what in the network, how they should be chosen and how they should be accountable to the rest of the membership, to making recommendations about how all parts of the network could communicate effectively with each other. There was also a lot of discussion about how the network could and should represent civil society and the forest-dependent communities that formed the basis of their constituency.



The recommendations were discussed, decided upon and adopted by a formal General Assembly, and included the election of a renewed Coordination team and a substantial increase in membership. Engagement in the process, which had a strong focus on building a common understanding of the issues being tackled by the PGDF and members' common objectives and values, stimulated a strong level of energy and interest, especially among members in the departments.

An interesting feature of the PGDF that it has maintained from the start and about which the members feel strongly is that it has not registered itself as a formal organisation. If there are projects or finances to manage, one or more members take that on and have clear accountability to the Coordination team and the Monitoring Committee.

As Sylvie Nadège Mfoutou Banga, the Coordinator of the PGDF, explains, "When a network registers itself, it usually becomes a 'super-NGO' and competes with its members. We wanted to be sure that our Platform didn't suffocate the members' own opportunities. We encourage members to collaborate with each other and develop initiatives together and we don't want the Platform to take away that space."



## OD ISSUE III

### STRATEGIC PLANNING

Since it started, the PGDF has always had action and annual plans in place. However, at one stage, it got to a point where the planning was somewhat disconnected from what actually took place: the plans were not necessarily realistic given the capacity and engagement of the members. So, once the PGDF had reviewed and was satisfied with its structure, the next step was to take another look at how it planned its work. This process again started at the departmental level, with a series of action plans that outlined what people on the ground were going to do to make sure that the network could achieve its overall objectives. These were then brought together into a plan at the national level, which included on-the-ground action, as well as lobbying and policy work, all aimed at improving how forests are managed and decisions taken. As part of putting that plan into action, the PGDF has become increasingly strategic about how it engages with national processes, taking time to consult and plan with members before its representatives attend key meetings or decision-making forums.

## OD ISSUE IV

### DIVERSITY AND INCLUSION

Right from the start, the PGDF has had a preoccupation with how it can ensure that it is *genuinely representing community voices* and especially those of groups that are often marginalised, such as women and indigenous people. The network has been characterised by a number of very active and articulate women leaders, which has encouraged their participation to a certain extent, but they have, so far, tended to be significantly in the minority. Indigenous voices in the network have not been as noticeable, and more work remains to be done there. At most PGDF meetings, non-indigenous men are by far the majority. So, the next step that the PGDF is going to take is to explore ways of ensuring that all voices are represented and heard in its work. This will entail tackling participation in its own organisation – how it can facilitate the involvement of women, indigenous people, and people from remote communities in the work and decision making of the network. Even more significantly, it wants to ensure that these voices are better represented in the broader forest debate. At present, that work is just getting started, and again involves going back to the departments to better understand local dynamics and the barriers that might be in place.

In addition to looking directly at diversity and inclusion within its own network, the PGDF is planning to support its members to look at issues of conflict management and trust building and how to manage them. This will include working with communities to look at good examples of how people manage and transform conflict in their own communities, as well as supporting members and community representatives in developing skills in negotiation.

# OD ISSUE V

## IMPACT

As a result of the time and energy that the members of the PGDF have put in over the years on developing themselves and their work, with the support of other organisations like Well Grounded and ClientEarth, they have become increasingly recognised by key actors in the forest sector as having an important voice in processes connected with forest issues in the RoC. They have managed to introduce discussions of key issues, such as land tenure and community forestry, into the national debate and have had considerable influence on the revision of the Congolese Forest Code.

NB: Importantly, throughout the time that the PGDF has existed, the network has also collaborated closely with other international NGOs, principally Client Earth and FERN, from which they have received both technical and financial support. Well Grounded has tried to ensure that its work with the PGDF is complementary to that of other organisations and fully recognises that the PGDF's development as an organisation is due to its own efforts and the support of all the different partners and supporters it has had over the years. Well Grounded is just one contributor.

## CONCLUDING REMARKS

The PGDF and Well Grounded have been on a journey together and are still en route: each of us has learned a lot from the other. The PGDF has a strong reputation in the RoC and is seen as a key actor on forest issues and as capable of getting things done. Its members speak with enthusiasm and passion about forests and communities and they can be quick off the mark when a community or area is at risk. Well Grounded has learned a huge amount about how networks work and the delicate process of supporting the development of trust and confidence between people.

Sylvie Nadège Mfoutou Banga,  
Coordinator

What was important about Well Grounded's collaboration is that you listened to all of us – members and Coordination – and you took everything that people said into account as you made suggestions. The other thing was that you didn't enter into our internal differences – you always made sure that everyone, whatever side of the argument they were on, knew about what you were doing with us all. It was really important, because at the start the network was so dispersed and Well Grounded helped us have the difficult conversations we needed and to bring all the different ideas together. We now have the tools to deal with internal divisions if they happen again. These days we are able to focus on the important issues threatening our forests and our communities.



# FACTORS OF SUCCESS

- A network whose members are ready to speak openly about the challenges it faces and their root causes.
- A network that has champions for change and a level of clarity about its overall direction: without that, the OD practitioner can do nothing.
- A clear understanding by everyone involved of what the network's purpose is, why they are members, and what they hope to contribute and to receive.
- Development of clarity within the network about its ownership: key for the PGDF was when members started to recognise that the network included all of them, not just the individuals elected to the Coordination team.
- A willingness on the part of OD practitioners and Coordination team members to work with every level of the organisation: to travel to meet members on the ground and take all ideas on board.
- OD practitioners who are attentive to the importance of not taking sides when conflicts and differences arise within the organisation: it is essential to build trust and to ensure that everyone concerned has all the information necessary.
- An OD process that goes hand in hand with work on the ground. Critical in the case of the PGDF was the fact that Well Grounded could support the OD process while another organisation, Client Earth, was working with the PGDF on the content of its work. That meant that the PGDF could instantly put decisions and new ideas into practice in its day-to-day work, which was advancing in parallel. The three organisations constantly learned from each other and incorporated that learning into practice. If an OD process is isolated from the work on the ground, it can stagnate.







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.

[www.well-grounded.org](http://www.well-grounded.org)