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Executive Summary: State of Knowledge-Based Decision-Making at CBFP

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Process

A team of four members of the CBFP Academic and Research College conducted 13 semi-structured stakeholder interviews between November 22 – 24, 2016 at the CBFP annual Meeting of the Parties in Kigali, Rwanda. Interviews were conducted in French and English using an interview protocol that asked questions about the Congo Basin on four topics: (1) the state of research; (2) the communication of research findings; (3) the use of research in decision-making; and (4) the capacity to conduct science. All interviews were confidential, and therefore the responses, which were recorded in writing during the interviews, have been anonymized. Interviewees represented a range of organizations and roles within CBFP, and were categorized as government, donor, multilateral, civil society, or industry.

The anonymized responses were organized into a matrix by respondent, and were qualitatively analyzed for patterns and themes. These results are summarized below. Please note, the findings of this work are the authors' effort to objectively and accurately convey the results of the semi-structured stakeholder interviews, and do not necessarily represent the views of the authors themselves.

Findings

The findings below represent what the respondents told us, and listing them together may be a helpful reminder that often the progress is based on mundane actions rather than flashy or innovative ones.

Research

Respondents generally felt there was a significant amount of research being conducted in the region, but raised three main concerns about it:

1) It was hard to access and not centralized
2) The quality was highly variable
3) It is not necessarily responsive to what decision makers need

There was some overlap in what respondents thought were high-priority research topics; the number in parenthesis denote the number of respondents who mentioned the priority):

- Efficacy of different approaches (*e.g.* what impact have different governance approaches had on deforestation?) (3)
- Impact of REDD+ (3)
- Non-timber forest products/bushmeat trading (3)
- Impact of climate change on ecosystems (3)
- Land tenure and land use planning (2)
- Zoonotic disease transmission (2)
- Ecology of intact forest landscapes (2)
- Baselines, particularly for REDD+ (2)
- Economic value of saving forest landscapes
- Impact of slash and burn agriculture

- Population genetics
- Impact of conservation programs on development

On the positive side, a few respondents noted research and research institutions offer an opportunity to engage important entities that are currently under-represented at CBFP: the private sector and non-environmental actors (e.g. agriculture, finance, etc).

Science Communication

Many of the respondents felt scientific research was not being used to inform decision making in the sub-region. Three key elements emerged from the interviews:

Targeting: Scientists must speak to the decision makers who are most likely to use or translate their work into actionable items, and they need to initiate the communication. One respondent suggesting using political economy analysis to identify the appropriate decision makers.

Communication: Peer-reviewed journals, the preferred method of communication for scientists were roundly considered ineffective at communicating results to decision makers. Research results should be communicated clearly and concisely.

Accessibility: Ideally, there should be a portal where data and research can be easily shared. There could be communication between the data generators and the data users—a conversation where both could understand what was being generated, how it was being used, and what else would be useful.

Knowledge-Based Decision-Making

Respondents were in agreement that research findings and decision support tools are not well-used in decision making in the sub-region. Most thought there was significant room to improve this, but cautioned that these would quickly get embroiled with political and governance issues. One respondent also noted that care needs to be taken to make sure science, possibly of dubious quality, isn't used to manipulate decisions. There were positive examples of knowledge-based decision making—great ape management, local eco-guard targeting, and advancement of the REDD+ process were all mentioned. Suggestions for improvement fell into three main categories:

Show value: Help decision makers (both policy makers and private sector decision makers) understand how they can benefit from using research in decision making and employing structured decision making approaches.

Provide consultative services: In addition to communicating research outcomes, scientists should provide expert advice upon request for specific issues. A panel of experts who could be "on call" to respond to such questions would be helpful.

Build capacity: Train decision makers (and students) to use science in decision making, and to use decision support tools. One respondent also suggested training on negotiations and mediation.

Regional Capacity

Feedback on regional capacity to train scientists and decision-makers and conduct independent research on topics important to CBFP focused on building the right kind of capacity. This included:

- Near universal agreement that there is insufficient capacity in the sub-region
- Significant need to focus capacity building on the skills that are most needed. Respondents generally agreed that capacity building should focus on executive functions and critical thinking skills. Some respondents felt that even most graduate level scientists could perform quality experimental research,

but were not skilled at developing new lines of research or synthesizing multiple streams of evidence, especially when it conflicted.
    - This matched with a commonly voiced concerns that existing educational offerings were not effective at generating quality scientists capable of novel research and synthesizing complex streams of information
    - Respondents noted this is a long term, work-intensive mentoring process. The IPCC approach of creating multi-disciplinary scientific teams was mentioned as a potential model for improved work-based professional training and mentorship.
- A lack of financial support for researchers and educators in the region hampered quality research and education and contributes to brain drain. There is demand for higher-quality universities and publications
- Governments are more likely to fund research and education efforts if the scientists and teachers demonstrate why their work is valuable
- The private sector should play an increasing role in setting priorities and funding capacity building, since it stands to benefit from increased capacity
- For CBFP to be effective, capacity building must also occur outside of the environmental sector

Feedback on CBFP

Although the interview protocol did not specifically ask about CBFP's structure and efficacy, we did get a number of responses on the subject. Major points of concern or pieces of feedback include:

Efficacy of the Annual Meeting of Parties

Multiple respondents expressed frustration that little seems to be accomplished at the MoP. There are a large number of presentations, but few specific outcomes from the meeting, so while the content is often interesting, it does not impact people's work. Specific recommendations included:

- Better curating attendees: there should be a greater focus on the group of people who make decisions about forestry in the region. Ministries (e.g. Finance, Agriculture, Planning, etc..), outside of the environmental/forestry sector should be represented, and there should be more private sector participation. This also raised the specter of whether COMIFAC is the right organizing body for a broader constituency that included non-environmental actors
- Create a space for critical assessment of projects. The instinct to be laudatory often prevents important conversations about what is not working in the region.

Proper Role for CBFP

A number of respondents noted that we need to assess what the appropriate role is for a regional institution, recognizing that it isn't a decision-making institution. Suggestions for activities where CBFP can add value include:

- Aggregated data across the region. Specific suggestions include ensuring access to relevant data and organizing existing research institutes into a more coherent network
- Manage collaboration to make the region more visible in climate change negotiations
- Spearhead regional standard-setting that prevent a regulatory race to the bottom driven by competition for foreign investment
- Organize interactions between high-level stakeholders and researchers
- Define regional research priorities

Conclusion

While this was a small study and not necessarily representative, it did demonstrate a convergence of views on some points. While there was a general consensus that there is much room for improvement in knowledge-based decision-making in the Congo Basin, there were also specific recommendations for how to improve it. Some of these items were included in the Stream 5 recommendations at the 2017 MOP, and have been included in the draft CBFP Medium Term priorities. While some can be implemented now on a smaller scale, others require additional resources political will, or both.