Proposal by the conservation authorities for the inclusion of the Sangha Trinational on the UNESCO World Heritage List

Report on the consultation process undertaken with local and indigenous communities living around Lobéke National Park

26 January to 2 February 2012 – Cameroon

CEFAID, February 2012.
Introduction.
For a number of years the conservation authorities of the Sangha Trinational (TNS) have been engaged in the process of nominating a section of the forest landscape of the Congo Basin as a UNESCO World Heritage Site. Eventually the nomination process proceeded quickly. This report documents CEFAID’s experience of the consultation process with the local and indigenous communities on the Cameroonian side of the TNS about the proposal to nominate the TNS as a World Heritage Site.

The nomination application had already been deferred once, in June 2011, because many of those involved at the local level, and in particular the local and indigenous people, had not been informed, let alone consulted, about the nomination. In order to resubmit the application, the Cameroonian component of the TNS conservation authorities responsible for Lobeke National Park and its periphery, conducted a consultation process with the local and indigenous communities.

This consultation took place with the financial and technical assistance of WWF between 26th January and 2nd February 2012 with a view to submitting the application on 1st February 2012. While these consultations were taking place, the three parties to the submission (Central African Republic, Republic of Congo and Cameroon) as well as the Head of Conservation of the Lobeke National Park, met with UNESCO officials in Yaoundé to finalise the documentation for the nomination in compliance with the 1st February deadline.

This raises the question of how the concerns, wishes and views of the communities being consulted could possibly be taken into consideration or be reflected in a document being finalised at State level and submitted for consideration by the World Heritage Committee at the very time that the consultations were taking place. Indeed, some of the communities were only visited after the application had been completed and submitted.

Having been invited to these consultations, CEFAID observed the methodological approach used by WWF over the course of the consultation process. Our observations led us to conclude that the consultation process did not make it possible for the communities to gain sufficient information to provide their opinion on the nomination of their forest landscape as a World Heritage Site. Not only did the process fail to facilitate their understanding of the impacts of a concept which was completely new to them, but it also gave them no time to digest the information about the purpose of the consultation.

Furthermore, not all the communities within this landscape – fewer than a quarter – were visited by the consultation teams.

Purpose of this report
The aim of this report is to inform the various parties to this process, including the respective governments, UNESCO, the IUCN and WWF, of both the positive and negative elements of the consultation process.

To clarify: this is a review of the process undertaken to consult the local stakeholders about the registration of the TNS as a World Heritage Site, as carried out within some of the communities local to the Lobeke National Park, in the communal areas of Moloundou and Salapoumbé, between 28th January and 1st February 2012, following a preparatory session held two days previously, on 26th and 27th January 2012, at the offices of the conservation authorities of the aforesaid Protected Area, located at Mambélé.

The case for this investigation
Although the consultations were initially planned to take place from the 16th to the 22nd of January 2012, the Head of Conservation of Lobeke National Park visited CEFAID’s Coordinator in January,
advising that the consultations had just been postponed to 26th January.

Once CEFAID had received its letter of invitation to the consultation with its attached programme of activities, it became apparent to the CEFAID team that there were problems.

Firstly, there was not enough time allocated for the planned activities in each community. Secondly, over 75% of the affected communities on the Cameroon side of the TNS been excluded from the consultations. The short amount of time spent in each community was not sufficient for community members to debate or consider their opinions.

Given these issues, we decided to participate in the entire process.

**Observations during the consultation process**

Having completed our observation of the entire consultation process, we have been able to make the following observations:

1. **Positive aspects**
   The aspects of the consultation process which we judge to be positive, are as follows:
   - Undertaking to consult the stakeholders in general, and to consult both the local and the indigenous communities following the initial rejection of the nomination;
   - Involving the relevant authorities: administrative, municipal and traditional; the logging companies; local NGOs; representatives of some of the community organisations as well as two members of the Baka Pygmy indigenous communities;
   - Covering the participants’ expenses for travel, food and lodging;
   - Holding some sessions specifically within the indigenous Baka communities;
   - Giving financial support to specific communities to compensate for their lengthy waiting times.

2. **Omissions and other weaknesses**
   Those aspects which could be considered as weaknesses, omissions or as requiring improvement, are noted below:
   - An unrealistic timescale: it being virtually impossible to hold seven information-giving and consultation meetings per day, with two hours allocated to each community visit, and with the officials choosing to return home each night (to Moloundou); all this in the context of further constraints such as the distances to be covered, the poor condition of the roads, the need to assemble the communities, etc. This situation meant that the teams in charge of the consultations were only able to make brief appearances to the few chosen communities, often for less than 30 minutes, just long enough for the administrative officer to deliver his speech which, more often than not, was unrelated to the purpose of the visit and left no time for members of the communities to ask questions;
   - The powerful – if not intimidating – impact of the ‘dictatorial’ speeches given by the administrative officers which discouraged free expression by members of the communities;
   - The haste displayed by the Sub-Divisional Officer and his entourage after their speeches gave the audience no opportunity to seek further information in order to give or withhold their consent freely;
   - Manipulating the agenda to convey messages of a political nature and information on irrelevant topics such as security issues, the fight against poaching, on hygiene and cleanliness, new repressive forces in the area, etc.;
   - The absence of the Head of Conservation despite his having signed the letters of invitation, and the fact that he was being represented by someone not widely known to the participants;
   - The size of the visiting teams, whose members numbered over seven (Sub-Divisional Officer, Mayor, gendarmes, policemen, NGO representatives, etc.) only served to alarm and worry the audiences, many of whom found themselves having to leave where the activities were taking place;
• The lack of objective criteria to determine which participants and communities to consult. In addition the preparatory session was not attended by representatives of communities in the South and the North of Lobeke National Park, in particular those from Mboy, Kika and Libongo;
• The total exclusion of a number of local and indigenous communities from within the Sangha Trinational landscape such as those living along the major road routes of Yokadouma-Mboy-Libongo as far as Bela, of Yokadouma-Salapoumbé, as well as of Moloundu-Nguilili. Similarly excluded were the communities living along the rivers such as the Ngoko;
• The very small number of representatives from the indigenous Baka communities on the consultation team, i.e. one Baka member, which was increased to two after the intervention of the Salapoumbé Sub-Divisional Officer following protests by some of the other participants;
• The treatment of the Baka and Bantu community leaders invited to the sessions for their expert knowledge of the communities, their ability to interpret and explain the message, and for mobilising their peers, was a cause of great concern as they considered their remuneration – a total of 18,000 CFA francs, or 2,000 CFA francs per day – a mockery, or a display of contempt by the organisers;
• The transformation of the consultation activity into an official visit and the Sub-Divisional Officer’s monopolisation of the platform in order to disseminate his own information and messages which had no relevance to the reason for which the communities had assembled;
• 50,000 CFA francs were paid to each traditional (Bantu) township chieftainship although these gatherings regularly numbered about ten participants, whereas in the outlying villages where attendance was far higher – from 50 to 150 people – they received a total of 25,000 CFA francs. While acknowledging the imbalance, or injustice, in this form of support to the communities, there is also the question of whether giving money to the community in this way, a few minutes before the start of a meeting, constitutes paying for votes;
• The inadequate amount of time allocated to meetings in the communities visited, i.e. two hours per session, and the failure to keep to this timetable because the official delegation was unwilling to stay overnight in the villages and chose instead to return home, resulting in a certain haste after the lengthy speeches;
• The failure to respect certain resolutions adopted at the preparatory workshop by the WWF official who, following a private dialogue with the Sub-Divisional Officer, decided to allocate 25,000 CFA francs to each outlying village in which a meeting was held, as against the 30,000 CFA francs set during the plenary session, without any explanation to the team members.

3. Consequences
• The resignation of some participants who did not consider it useful to take part in the synthesis meeting scheduled for 2nd February 2012, i.e. on completion of the consultation process;
• Disagreements between civil society representatives (NGOs) or communities and the organisers about the term ‘consultation’, about the timetable, and about the reduction in the amount of money budgeted for payment to the remote villages visited, which in general were those of the indigenous Baka people;
• The very small number of communities visited, being the only means by which people could ask about the concept of a World Heritage Site and get a clear understanding of the pros and cons or any other potentially restrictive aspects of its implementation; quite simply, no-one in the villages visited was able to gain sufficient information or clarification about the proposal with a view to giving their opinion freely.

4. Recommendations
• To avoid the risk of creating serious social problems in the future, in particular on implementation of the concept of a World Heritage Site, it is recommended that the organisers, UNESCO, and all interested parties conduct information-giving and consultation processes with the communities in order to obtain their potential consent freely and in full knowledge of the facts (free, prior and informed consent);
Involvement of conservation officials and officials from the administrative and technical departments of government ministries, in particular from the Ministry of Forestry and Wildlife (MINFOF), the Ministry of the Environment, Nature Protection and Sustainable Development (MINEPDED) and the Ministry of Social Affairs (MINAS), etc. is vital, as is their capacity building, specifically in the skills required for effective and appropriate consultation with local and indigenous communities;

Civil society (NGOs, Associations, etc.) should participate actively in the process and provide training or capacity building for all the communities living around this Protected Area with the aim of providing them with a good understanding of the ins and outs of the concept of nomination as a World Heritage Site;

The process of providing information, training and capacity building should be a prerequisite for effective consultation of the indigenous and local communities and their opinions should be taken into consideration upon completion of the consultation, since they possess indisputable ancestral rights which should always be given special attention due to the fact that the most important elements of these communities’ existence are located within the forests of which they are, moreover, the customary owners;

Completion of the report and its prospective submission to UNESCO by the Cameroonian Park authorities should only take place once the concerns expressed by the local communities and indigenous people affected by this outcome have been taken into consideration;

The consultations, contrary to what was noted in the field during the visits which took place between 26th January and 2nd February 2012, should include all the indigenous and local communities who have rights to and interests in the forest being considered for inclusion as a UNESCO World Heritage Site, and not only a small number of communities. The affected zone is that which extends from Libongo and Mboy in the North of Lobeke National Park, to Socambo in the South West of this Protected Area, passing through Ngatto Nouveau, Salapoumbé and Nguilili as far as Molundou in the East, as well as Kika, Zega and other villages located along the Ngoko in the South of the Park, and not forgetting the villages of the communities who live in the interior of this forest.

Conclusion
This operation was a complete fiasco in every respect. Those parties engaged in similar processes should strive to avoid the negative aspects we have noted here. They will be judged, as will the conservation and development officials, on how seriously they are seen to take this process. Thorough consultation processes now will spare us future tension and conflict which may otherwise arise through a lack of understanding of a concept which is ultimately both commendable and beneficial to all, such as that of a World Heritage Site.