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Inside Forest Diplomacy: A Case Study of the Congo Basin under Global Environmental Governance

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Abstract: The growing global interest in biodiversity conservation and the role of forestland sustainability in climate change mitigation has led to the emergence of a new specific field of global environmental governance that we called ‘forest diplomacy’. With the largest tropical forest area after the Amazon, Congo Basin countries (CBc) constitute a major negotiation bloc within global forest-related governance arenas. Despite this position, CBc seem embedded in a failure trap with respect to their participation in forest diplomacy arenas. This paper examines the major causes of the recurrent failures of CBc within forest diplomacy. A qualitative empirical approach (including key informant interviews, groups discussion, participant observation, and policy document review) was used. From a conceptual and theoretical perspective, this research combines global and political sociology approaches including environmentality and blame avoidance works. The main finding reveals that the recurrent failures of CBc in forest diplomacy are partly due to the lack of strategic and bureaucratic autonomy of CBc that strongly depend on financial, technical, and knowledge resources from Western cooperation agencies or consultancy firms. Our discussion highlights that this dependency is maintained by most of the key actor groups involved in forest diplomacy related to CBc, as they exploit these failures to serve their private interests while avoiding the blame of not reducing deforestation and biodiversity loss in the Congo Basin.

Keywords: forest diplomacy; forestland governance; global environmental governance; deforestation; Congo Basin



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1. Introduction

With the emergence of biodiversity preservation and global climate change mitigation issues on the international relations agenda, tropical forests have become much more significant for global sustainability goals [1–7]. Since the pre-Rio Brundtland report entitled ‘Our Common Future’, many rounds of negotiations have been held at international, transnational, and national levels to define or reinforce a set of policy measures (rules, principles, norms) and forest-related instruments. The focal point of these political debates was to reduce deforestation and biodiversity loss by improving the governance of forestlands from the local to global levels [8–10] within what we call ‘forest diplomacy’. The notion of forest diplomacy developed in this paper builds on recent works related to two fundamental concepts in international relations: diplomacy and environmental diplomacy. The essence of the first, diplomacy, is summarized by Balzacq et al. [11] as an adjustment process based on instruments and practices through which not only states but actors support, coordinate, and achieve their identity, interests, and values. Regarding the second, Orsini [12] highlights the fact that environmental diplomacy does not solely deal with environmental issues but also is related to trade, intellectual property, energy, health, and even security issues. Similarly, the notion of forest diplomacy refers to the process of transnational co-management of forestland resources. To be specific, forest diplomacy can be defined as

a set of substantial bilateral and multilateral negotiation processes aimed at integrating a wide range of interests defended by a mosaic of public and private actors that interact around the exploitation or conservation of above- and below-ground forestland resources.

In Africa, most of the tropical rainforest is concentrated in the Central African region of the Congo Basin. Since the creation of the Central African Forests Commission (COMIFAC) in 1999, Congo Basin countries (CBc) have been important actors in groups of international forest-related negotiations, especially within international climate change regimes [13]. As an example, this increasing interest in Congo Basin forests in global environmental arenas has been closely associated with the 2007 decision of the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) [14] to explore options for reducing CO₂ emissions from tropical deforestation by providing financial incentives to developing countries [15–17]. CBc also played an important role in preparing the proper formal conditions for an efficient implementation of the UN ‘Reducing Emissions from Deforestation and forest Degradation’ (REDD+) initiative. Acknowledging this role does not mean that they led the process. However, Humphreys [16] pointed out that CBc have been active members of the Coalition for Rainforests Nations in claiming substantial financial rewards for deforestation reduction in their territories. Discussions around the idea of preserving the Congo Basin forests hence became an important issue for technical or financial cooperation [18]. Despite the above-mentioned growing interest at the international and transnational levels for the preservation and sustainable use of the Congo Basin forestlands, a backstage look at the negotiations reveals that CBc’s forest diplomacy functions erratically. This situation seems to entangle CBc’s forest diplomacy in a cycle of failures marked by a mismatch between their expectations and the outputs of their negotiations. As an example, from 2013 to 2017 the major formal goal of CBc’s while participating in international forest diplomacy arenas was to obtain binding agreements that would constrain developed countries to support them in safeguarding their forests while moving forward with their development prospects. Moreover, they also expect to be released from the facilitation of third-party accredited agencies who, very frequently, receive assistance from developed countries on their behalf and monitor them. In short, CBc expected more direct environmental cooperation with developed countries [19].

The aim of this paper is to scrutinize, from the case study of CBc, how a forest, as a major growing object of contemporary diplomacy, has become a highly political issue of global sustainability challenges. As such, this paper examines why the participation of CBc in forest diplomacy seems unsuccessful, at least as far it meets the formal objectives of their diplomatic delegation. From an empirical perspective, this research builds on first-hand qualitative data collected from 2014 to 2017 from national to international forest diplomacy arenas. This timeframe corresponds to the period during which the first author of this paper was closely involved in forest-related negotiation processes from a privileged inside position, as a member of the CBc’s delegation to forests and climate change negotiation at the United Nations. To meet the above aim of our research, the current introduction is followed by a theoretical framework in Section 2. In Section 3, we proceed with the empirical methodology employed in this research, followed by a presentation of the results in Section 4, and our conclusions are in Section 5.

2. Theoretical Framework

To frame this work, we will consider two complementary perspectives that are particularly relevant to meet the abovementioned research aim: environmentality and blame avoidance politics.

2.1. Environmentality

As a concept, environmentality emerged in the 1990s and has been applied since then to many environmental issues [20]. Additionally called green governmentality, this theoretical framework, largely inspired by Michel Foucault’s works, aims at drawing ways of thinking about how power works through the construction of environmental issues and the solutions proposed to these issues [20]. Most especially, environmentality focusses on

how regimes of truth are made, what drives the formation of strategies and regulations, and how human subjectivities are enacted with reference to environmental issues [21]. This second definition is the one that is mostly going to be used in this analysis as to frame the subjectivities that motivate the participation of actors to forest diplomacy in Congo Basin.

Within the wide range of the operation of environmental negotiations at a global level, environmentality has been mobilized frequently by different actors to capture the objective and subjective dimensions that framed the design or adoption of certain resolutions. Among these works is that of Ciplet and Roberts [22], which highlights the inside of the lead up to and the aftermath of the 2015 Paris negotiations. Indeed, in this paper the authors present at a micro-level how tensions arose during negotiations within the G-77 group with the sub-groups' parties having diverging subjective interests opposing them to each other instead of uniting them against the North as expected. In the same vein, employing a green governmentality lens, Olson and Gareau [23] analyzed the debate surrounding a controversial dam in Laos, the Xayaburi. Through a green governmentality approach, these authors did both an investigation of the macro-political influences on hydropower development, including trade liberalization and regional economic development, and the micro-political disciplining of state and non-state actors who, through legitimizing particular discourses and practices, reinforce global power relations. Using another environmental politics context, Gareau [24] provided an in-depth analysis of the ongoing attempt to phase out methyl bromide (MeBr) under the Montreal Protocol. Gareau demonstrated through a green governmentality framework how allowable exemptions, the influence of large (predominantly California-based) agricultural businesses, and the expanding influence of neo-liberal economic and political paradigms have frustrated efforts to eliminate this toxic and ozone-depleting substance (ODS).

At the Congo Basin level, environmentality is particularly relevant to analyze forest diplomacy beyond an examination of forest governance issues at the national level. For example, there are very informative works from Oyono [25], Ribot et al. [26], Endama et al. [27], and Brown et al. [28] on forest governance of green governmentality inspiration that highlight the recurrent failure of forest decentralization. These include in Cameroon where there are differentiated responsibilities both at formal and informal levels among the state, science, and civil society organizations. As a way forward, some of these authors recommended the design of a monitoring framework for decentralized forest management in Cameroon.

One of the recent works on the politics of global forest governance in the Congo Basin is that of Ongolo and Karsenty [29]. The authors designed the notion of 'cunning government' to capture the behavior of forest-rich countries like Cameroon's ability to skillfully torpedo undesired forest policy reforms imposed by global players, while avoiding blame from the international community. In the same vein, Andong and Ongolo [30] unveiled in their work on the agenda-setting process of the VPA-FLEGT in Cameroon which is strongly influenced by a subtle game of power between European Union actors and the Cameroonian government leading to a delay of almost 10 years in the implementation of this illegal logging bilateral policy that is crucial for the reduction in illegal timber import from the Congo Basin forests. Moreover, the authors have emphasized the recurrent use of blame avoidance strategies by some actors involved in order to be formally in accordance with the global sustainability effort while safeguarding their informal priority of getting international environmental payments (rent-seeking behavior).

In summary, forest governance in Congo Basin, from an environmentality perspective, seems marked by erratic functioning expressed through a set of challenging issues that include disputes about the role (central or peripheral) of the state in the management of forestland resources. In addition, there is the difficult coexistence of the global demand for biodiversity conservation and domestic needs for development and economic prosperity. The brief review above also shows that the governance of Congo Basin forests has been mainly analyzed in a domestic arena. At the same time, little is known about how key actors of this forest-rich region work at a global level, especially in forest diplomacy arenas. Our research aims to fill this gap.

The overall substance of this research is that the causes of the erratic functioning of the politics of forest governance in Congo Basin cannot be fully understood through the analysis of domestic politics that influence the forest sector at the local and national level. However, there is a need for an in-depth analysis of the strategies of CBc within forest negotiation in international arenas. To do so, the following questions are particularly relevant: Who are the key actors involved in forest diplomacy related to the Congo Basin? How do they interact among themselves and with other actors within forest diplomacy arenas dominated by governmental interests? Finally, what are the formal and informal interests defended by these actors, i.e., the subjectivities that guide the choice of these actors? As a complementary theoretical account to this environmentality approach, we advance the analysis by combining it with the blame avoidance politics, which has been highlighted above as a recurrent actors' strategy in domestic forest governance reforms in the Congo Basin.

2.2. Scrutinizing the Politics of Blame Avoidance

This paper employs 'the politics of blame avoidance' developed by R. Kent Weaver in 1986 [31] as a theoretical framework. According to this theory, politicians, or in this case governmental actors, in their daily duties care more about avoiding becoming unpopular and losing their power positions than fostering successful actions. For the achievement of this objective, those actors mobilize a set of political strategies. These may include:

- "Agenda limitation behavior", which is a specific blame avoidance strategy employed by policymakers. It consists of preventing blame generation by keeping potentially costly choices from being considered [31] (p. 386). While keeping some issues completely out of the agenda might seem sometimes challenging, Weaver points out another shade of agenda limitation in the tendency of policymakers to influence when they face some unexpected challenges such as "issue redefinition", which, according to Weaver's works, refers to the rescue plan of 'agenda limitation' as it is mostly used in cases where the first strategy was not successful. Indeed, it most frequently occurs in cases where policymakers cannot keep the blame regenerating off the policy agenda. They will then try to reshape it in such a way as to avoid the blame;
- "Throw good money after bad" is also an interesting blame avoidance strategy to consider in the case of forest diplomacy. According to Weaver [31], it specifically refers to a non-zero or negative-sum game (when all possible outcomes involve losses) often used by policymakers. Indeed, there are situations where policymakers cannot avoid a recognition of their responsibility in specific failures, usually in those situations where they can neither keep the negative impact out of the agenda, nor diffuse it by using an issue redefinition strategy. To be specific, what decision-makers do in such situations is to mobilize extra resources to shore up the status quo. To illustrate this strategy, Weaver reported about the case of Indochina as an example where United States policymakers were mostly guided by the principle of saving face: 'Do not lose the rest of Vietnam to Communist control before the next election' [32] (p. 252). The behavior of the USA's policymakers in this case was also guided by the fact they knew they could lose the war, and they did not want to be branded for having lost a country;
- "Passing the buck" is mostly mobilized in cases where a blame-generating situation could not be prevented to occur through the abovementioned strategies and a blame-generating decision needs to be taken. In these cases, decision-makers who are driven by their blame avoidance spirit would try everything to delegate the decision to someone else [33];
- "Finding the scapegoat" as a blame avoidance strategy mostly happens in cases where the decision-maker could not delegate the blame-generating decision to someone else. In this situation the decision-maker launches the unpopular action but presents it as an unavoidable consequence of its predecessors' or opponents' actions;
- "Jumping on the bandwagon" consists of policymakers unobtrusively changing their position within a decision-making process and adopting the popular one to avoid

- blame. In case their previous position was not made public, they can even pretend as if they had been the one who initiated the popular decision;
- “Circling the wagon” is a strategy based on the safety in numbers principle. Indeed, when in a negative-sum situation it becomes obvious for decision-makers that they can neither pass the buck nor throw good money after bad to maintain the status quo, they usually try to diffuse the blame onto all of the stakeholders involved in the situation so as to not be taken for the only one responsible for the losses. The outcomes of this strategy are usually consensus solutions: ‘Thus no one has to stick their neck out: everyone provides political cover for everyone else, making it difficult for a future political opponent to raise the issue’ [31] (p. 389);
 - “Stopping me before I kill again” is the last strategy on Weaver’s categorization of blame avoidance strategies. According to the author, this strategy mostly happens cases where a policymaker’s position is the politically responsible one, but they are facing a popular but wrong position. In order to avoid blame, they sacrifice their position and follow the popular but politically disputable one: ‘Thus the analogy to the murderer who asks that he should be stopped before he kills again: the policymakers know that what they are doing is wrong, but they cannot help themselves’ [31] (p. 389).

In accordance with the above developed theoretical frameworks and to the claims from the Congo Basin of forest diplomacy being entangled there in a failure cycle, we developed the following statements as working hypotheses for this analysis.

Hypothesis H1. *The recurrent and enthusiastic participation of Congo Basin countries in forest negotiations despite their technical and financial weaknesses and lack of autonomy is motivated by a rent-seeking behavior of those countries, while avoiding blame for forest governance failure at the domestic level.*

Hypothesis H2. *The financial and technical support of Northern countries towards Congo Basin countries within forest negotiations is led more by the need of those countries to give themselves a ‘good conscience’ and to avoid blame from their civil societies than to efficiently contribute to global sustainability efforts.*

Hypothesis H3. *External actor groups operating behind the scenes, such as consulting firms who act as third-party entities in forest diplomacy, are constraint by an overarching need of satisfying the northern countries who pay them as well as the recipient countries who should approve their recruitment or legitimize their involvement.*

3. Materials and Methods

The qualitative methodological approach employed in this research was articulated around three pillars: the data collection context, the data collection tools, and the data analysis methods. An important aspect to mention here is that our field work was conducted in a bi-directional manner. That is to say, the only reason the researchers have more insight on the research object than standard empirical research is because they are a part of the game and are direct actors, rather than guests.

3.1. Bi-Directional Partnership Approach

The bi-directional approach employed in this research aimed at experimenting with a mutual learning partnership between researchers and interviewees or related institutions [34]. The former shares their knowledge and scientific expertise to support policy-making, while the latter agrees to facilitate research works by providing better access to field study and data collection.

With a bi-directional approach, the research gets a privileged position to observe, scrutinize, and understand social processes through an insider perspective [35,36]. This approach substantially reduced bias that can sometimes be a source of interpretations of

qualitative data only based on ex situ interviews or document analysis. However, we must acknowledge that this insider position raises some tensions between the researcher's neutral stance and the professional active role as staff of the negotiating team [37]. As recommended in such situations, we complied as much as possible with the insider researcher's integrity standard [38]. As an example, this integrity consisted of rigorously clarifying our research interests with the team members of the negotiating group of the CBc in which the first author of this paper was integrated, protecting the anonymity of respondents, clearly informing those who did not ask for anonymity that their answers would ultimately be made public.

In the case of this research, the first author of this paper has been exclusively in charge of the fieldwork and was privileged to attend several rounds of climate change negotiations and related preparatory meetings in which the governance of Congo Basin forests was a core element of the agenda. Thanks to this valuable experience, we were able to map out a clear picture of the key actors involved in the politics of forest diplomacy with respect to Congo Basin forests (Table 1), to capture the real power games between those actors as well as to analyze their most relevant formal and informal interests. From a practical perspective, the first author of this paper was hired in 2017 as one of the external assistant negotiators for CBc and was in charge of preparing and supporting these countries through their major transnational forest organization (COMIFAC). This position enabled us to get clear and sharp insights into CBc's behavior within forest diplomacy arenas.

Table 1. Overview of empirical qualitative data collection.

Data Collection Approach	Number	Context, Place, and Date	Aim and Contribution
Experts' interviews	22	- Climate change negotiations in Bonn, Germany in May and November 2017 - Congo Basin countries CoP23 preparation workshop in Brazzaville, Rep. of Congo, August 2017	Highlighting actors' identities, their interests and the embedded power games
Group discussions	6	- Climate change negotiations in Bonn, Germany in May and November 2017 - Congo Basin countries CoP23 preparation workshop in Brazzaville, Rep. of Congo, August 2017	Highlighting actors' identities, their interests and the embedded power games
Document analysis	19	- Desk work and archives review at COMIFAC Yaoundé 2016–2018	Assessing the technical participation of CBc to CoPs prior to Bonn negotiations
Participant observations	N/A	- Climate change negotiations in Bonn, Germany in May and November 2017 - Congo Basin countries CoP23 preparation workshop in Brazzaville, Rep. of Congo, August 2017	Cross-checking the information obtained through in-depth interviews and group discussions

3.2. Data Collection and Analysis

This study covers the participation of CBc's forest diplomacy negotiations in the framework of UN climate change regime from the pre-Lima climate change conference in 2013 to CoP Fiji 23 in Bonn in 2017. This timeframe was selected because CBc enhanced their presence in international forest diplomacy arenas by increasing the size of their delegations and seeking to join technical coalitions and cooperation initiatives during these years [39]. This period also corresponds to a moment where the authors of this paper had enough access to the fieldwork, including a privileged access to UN forest-related and climate change negotiations, to be able to address the central question of the analysis.

Our empirical work included 22 key informant interviews with experts, 6 group discussions, an in-depth analysis of 19 unpublished policy documents, as well as participant observation, as shown in Table 1 and Appendix A. The group discussions consisted of representatives from CBc, the German development and cooperation agency (GIZ), the Japanese development cooperation agency (JICA), the World Bank, COMIFAC, and a few consultancy firms including SABKOF. Representatives of these participants were interviewed both individually and during group discussions to talk about their role within the preparation towards the negotiation rounds and during the negotiation rounds. They were also interviewed about their expectancies, their interests in participating in the processes, their motivation and frustrations, as well as the recommendations they wanted to put forward. Later on, for triangulation purposes the heads of different groups, as well as some random participants, were interviewed individually to see if what they said in groups matched what they were saying as a sole interviewee. The participants of the discussion groups were also followed up in negotiating rooms to see if their formal positions in forest diplomacy at work matched what they presented when interviewed by us. Our main interview guide in the Appendix (Appendix B) provides more details on the key questions that guided our conversations with interviewees. No recordings were made as the majority of our interviewees claimed that diplomacy arenas were too 'strategic and secret' for a live recording. Consequently, we mainly took notes in notebooks and collected some policy and strategic reports, as well as some photos, in order to reconstruct at a later point the data we collected and to proceed to their analysis.

4. Results

The 'game of chicken' is a well-established concept in social sciences, which has been used to picture environmental diplomacy [40] as a non-zero-sum game where the parties are supposed to either win together (e.g., sustainable development) or lose together (e.g., increase in global warming and global pandemic because of unsustainable use of natural resources). From this picture, we assume that a non-zero-sum game puts pressure on parties that stimulates them to make use of the blame avoidance politics because no one wants to defect and be responsible for the failure of not achieving the global sustainability goals which include tropical deforestation reduction. The below argumentation provides some insights on this point.

4.1. *The Bricolage of CBc in Forest Diplomacy Arenas*

As developed below, the participation of CBc in forest diplomacy arenas is characterized by a set of hasty decisions and amateurism in negotiation strategies similar to a bricolage work [41].

Table 2 above lists the five most relevant groups of actors active in the Congo Basin forest negotiations and their major roles with respect to forest diplomacy. State bureaucracies (state bureaucracies or ministries of forests, environmental and natural resources affairs, etc.) of CBc are listed as state entities. Next, there are 'new actors' (According to Biermann and Pattberg [41], apart from state actors, there is a growing group of new actors who are also decisive in international environmental relations. Among these actors there are international bureaucracies and global corporations.) grouped here in three main categories: International bureaucracies (UNFCCC Secretariat and World Bank/PREDD project), global corporations or bilateral development agencies (including Germany's GIZ, and Japan's JICA), and the science-related private networks or consultancy firms such as SABKOF. We added a category to Biermann and Pattberg's [42] classification called regional transnational organization, which is embodied by COMIFAC.

Regarding role distribution, we observed that CBc's actors lack sufficient bureaucratic autonomy in the preparation of their negotiation strategies in global environmental and forest governance domains. Following Fukuyama [43], the notion of bureaucratic autonomy in this paper refers to the status in which political principal issues are mandated to bureaucrats, or another specific service provider or partner, to act as its agent. In theory,

the political principal should be able to assess the provided service and control and blame the agent in case of non-fulfilment.

Table 2. Typology and role of the most relevant actors of forest diplomacy in the Congo Basin countries.

Actor Group	Institution (See appendix C for the Acronyms)	Role
State representations	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - MINFOF Cameroon, - MINEED Central African Republic, - MINFO Chad, - MINFOR Democratic Republic of Congo, - MINDEV Equatorial Guinea, - MINEV Gabon, - MINDEV Republic of Congo, - MINEV Rwanda, - MINEV São Tomé and Príncipe. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Prepare for the negotiation, - Negotiate, - Receive climate and forest conservation aid
International bureaucracies	UNFCCC Secretariat,	Donor/Preparation of CB countries for negotiations
Global corporations	World Bank PREDD project GIZ, JICA	Donor/Preparation of CB countries for negotiations
Regional transnational organizations	COMIFAC	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Prepare for negotiations - Negotiate, - Receive climate and forest conservation aid
Scientific private networks or related consulting firms	SABKOF	Technical and scientific assistance to CB countries before and during negotiations

In the case of this research, we observed that the preparation of CBc for forest diplomacy negotiations as well as their relationship with their ‘agents’ were often characterized by organizational improvisation, high dependency, and political bricolage. As an example, at the strategic meetings for international climate change negotiations that we observed during our fieldwork (Table 1), CBc were prepared by World Bank bureaucrats, bilateral cooperation agencies (GIZ, JICA), consulting firms, or UNFCCC Secretariat officers. Basic knowledge on climate change negotiations and global forest governance issues were hastily provided by consulting firms on the evening of international negotiations rounds, with an approximate background of consultants on international relations and the topics to be negotiated. According to some CBc’s officials from environment and forestry state bureaucracies (Appendix A, Interviews 1–10), this weakness is partly due to the Congo Basin delegation priority while participating in forest negotiations has often not been to meet the common United Nations forest-related objective of avoiding climate change mitigation through the reduction in deforestation and forest degradation. The reactions of some of our interviewees when they were seen outside of a negotiation session that they were assigned to follow-up during the Fiji Cop23 were in terms of ‘were you really expecting me to be inside . . . ’, or in a hilarious tonality ‘we are outside looking for where money is flowing so as to fetch some for our countries.’ This could already be considered as evidence of the weak interest of Congo Basin delegates in technical and strategic negotiations. Indeed, the regular participation of CBc in those negotiations has been mainly motivated by the possibilities of capturing international funds which may be used for other domestic purposes such as development prospects [36]. This is one of the reasons why very little attention has been paid to develop or reinforce their own technical and negotiation skills for efficient participation in forest negotiations. When asked why they kept participating in global forest negotiations if their priorities were elsewhere, one of the interviewees pointed out that

‘We cannot afford being formally acknowledged as less interested by deforestation reduction effort and more concerned by our development efforts. Moreover, we need to be smart. If we want to have a chance to capture some of the available environmental funds to foster our development back home, we need to make use of our vulnerability.’ (Interviewee 9)

This assertion leads to some lessons. The first is that the participation of CBc in forest diplomacy is framed, as many other environmental issues are, by environmentality (subjectivities that influence environmental issues) and driven by a ‘stop me before I kill again’ blame avoidance strategy. Most of the time they are not really convinced by the international agenda aimed at achieving global sustainable development goals and the related climate change mitigation dynamics. As such, they jump on the bandwagon because they do not want to become unpopular or be put aside by the ‘international community’ for not contributing to meeting global sustainability objectives. This lesson supports our first hypothesis. Moreover, we make two deductions from this assertion. The first is in alignment with Bayart’s perception of African politics where the extraversion of the ‘limbo’ perceived there is not a mistake but actually a political construction to serve some particular interests [44]. The second is in line with the ‘cunning government’ argumentation [29], which supports the point of view that CBc are strategically able to exploit their weaknesses to get international funding as part of the available rent from global climate change and forest-related governance regimes.

4.2. Northern Countries and Their Sake for Control and Consciousness Relief

Controlling information is a powerful strategy to impose one’s own preferences over others [45]. Similarly, control over resources [46] along with persuasion and dissuasion [47] have been used by dominant actors (the ‘potentate’) to change the behavior of the dominated or marginalized actors (the ‘subordinate’) (For a detailed analysis of a power relationship between the ‘potentate’ and the ‘subordinate’ actors in the context of forest policy domain, see Krott et al. [47]).

In the case of forest diplomacy, two of the three major power elements pointed out by Krott et al. [48] in forest policy domain, namely dis/incentive and dominant information, are particularly relevant to consider here. The provision or non-provision of these two elements (the third one, coercion, does not substantially matter in this case) has been controlled by developed countries through their cooperation agencies. These powerful actor groups pressure CBc and influence the governance of the Congo Basin forests, and, as such, they have guided the participation of CBc in forest diplomacy. Regarding the use of financial resources for instance, our fieldwork identified GIZ and JICA as the dominant providers of funding needed by the CBc, as well as their transnational forest organization (COMIFAC) for their preparation and participation in forest diplomacy and related international environmental negotiations. An example is provided in Table 3 through the funding provision for the preparatory phase of CBc with respect to their participation at the 23rd UNFCCC Conference of Parties held in Bonn in November 2017.

Table 3. Contribution of cooperation agencies to the preparation of Congo Basin countries for climate change CoP 23.

Sponsors	Financial Contributions (Euros)	Percentage on the Total Budget of CBc Preparation (%)	Total Budget Supplied by Sponsors (Euros)
World Bank (PREREDD project)	23,180	35.60	65,100
German cooperation (GIZ)	20,999	32.25	
Japanese cooperation (JICA)	20,921	32.15	
Congo basin countries	0.00	0	
COMIFAC	0.00	0	

This example of the participation of CBc at the 2017 CoP held in Bonn shows that, without funding from German and Japanese cooperation, CBc would not have been able to organize their preparations and meetings for the conference. The funding provided by these donors is also used by CBc to cover consulting firms’ costs. With such a level of financial dependency, one can easily imagine that CBc cannot efficiently defend their interests with sufficient autonomy in forest diplomacy negotiations as German and Japanese interests may not always meet those interests from CBc. By sponsoring the preparation and participation of CBc in international negotiations, developed countries implicitly have the upper hand over the CBc’s strategic information. In the same vein, they can indirectly

influence the choice and use of this information to foster their own interests in forest diplomacy negotiations. In other words, the CBc could not be expected to vigorously tackle topics that are not in the interest of their sponsor countries. When approached about the fact that sponsoring the participation of CBc to forest negotiations might be seen as a control over their strategies in forest diplomacy, one of the Northern interviewees answered in the following terms:

'We (industrialized countries) are pictured as having major responsibility in global warming. So we absolutely have to spend that much money into this issue to kind of relieve and avoid being always pointed as responsible for all the catastrophes happening in the world. At the same time, we have to keep our eyes opened to what developing countries are going to defend in negotiating rooms as green technology markets exploration is also one of our priorities in this thematic.' (Interviewee 19, Appendix A)

This interviewee's quote, as well as other arguments in the same direction such as 'Even if we do not trust the CBc we still have to keep on going with the process otherwise we will be pictured as the bad guys' (Interview 12, Appendix A) and 'One must be suicidal to step out of these negotiations for good' (Interview 20, Appendix A), highlights that Northern countries support CBc within forest negotiations under a 'throw good money after bad' blame avoidance strategy. To some extent, this financial and technical support is thus provided not necessarily because Northern countries want CBc to make the best decision towards global warming reduction effort and climate change mitigation, but because they want to avoid blame from Western electorates and civil societies for not acting enough for climate change mitigation. This result supports the second hypothesis put forward in this paper. In addition to what we learned from our field observations, the above interviewees' quotes also highlight how Northern countries' second priority, after that of not becoming unpopular vis-à-vis their electorate, is that of finding business opportunities within forest diplomacy. This corroborates the thoughts on green capitalism of Friedman, according to whom one of the major interests of developed countries within environmental cooperation is finding business opportunities [49]. Moreover, this observation supports the work of Cipler and Roberts [22] and Gareau [24] on the fact that green governmentality has an embedded stake in the economic benefit of actors that strongly influences the handling of environmental issues. This results in chances of having outputs that are not in alignment with the targeted formal objectives.

4.3. Influencing from Behind: The Role of Consulting Firms

Consulting firms play a major role in the frame of CBc participation in forest diplomacy. We focused on their specific role separately because they are often portrayed as independent experts who are involved in negotiation processes to strengthen technical capacities of Congo Basin delegates before and during international negotiations with an aim to lead them to having a major contribution within the global effort against global warming.

However, our field observations show that consulting firms are not that independent. Firstly, consulting firms are paid by Northern countries to build or reinforce the capacities of CBc. As such, these consulting firms would hardly work against the interests of Northern countries. As described in the case of the role of third-parties in environmental labeling processes and more specifically those related to the forest certification issue [50], the independence of an expertise provider whose client is at the same the order payer is a very challenging ideal to achieve.

Moreover, Biermann and Pattberg [41] highlighted that consulting firms usually care more about maintaining their job rather than pursuing some globally determined goals. Even if we would formulate this argument in a more nuanced way, the point defended by these authors is particularly relevant to consider in the case of this research. An assertion of one of the consultants providing expertise to CBc supports the argument on their incapacity of being independent and pushing the parties involved to take the most rational decision for global warming reduction: 'We are certainly negotiation experts, but we cannot challenge either the position of Congo Basin countries or that of those paying. If we do so, we will

lose our job. They are the bosses.’ (Interview 17, Appendix A). Another interviewee said, ‘Even if in some cases they seem to be picking the wrong decisions we cannot strongly oppose them. These are the rules of the game. Either you follow them or you are out.’ (Interview 18, Appendix A).

Thus, consulting firms cannot be neutral enough to technically lead forest diplomacy in the Congo Basin because they are entangled in the interests of Northern countries who control them through their pay check. This last point confirms our third hypothesis and shows how green governmentality and its subjective dimensions that framed the design or adoption of certain environmental decisions are a real concern. Indeed, in the case of CBc’s involvement in forest diplomacy, we observed how the commercial and economic private interests of consulting firms can influence the direction of an entire negotiation with potential impacts in the governance of forestland resources at least at the regional level.

5. Conclusions

This paper analyzed how and why the growing global interest in biodiversity conservation and the role of forestland sustainability in climate change mitigation has led to the emergence and rapid evolution of a new specific field related to international relations and global environmental politics that we called ‘forest diplomacy’. From an empirical perspective, the aim of this research was to scrutinize why forest diplomacy with respect to Congo Basin forests has worked as a failure machine since at least the end of the 2000s. The paper applied a set of rigorous political science and sociological theories and related conceptual frameworks that include blame avoidance politics, environmentality, and recent works on environmental diplomacy. Our research employed a qualitative bi-directional methodological approach. We came to the major conclusion that the failure dynamics of forest diplomacy regarding CBc is essentially linked to the weak intrinsic interests of both CBc and their Northern counterparts in meeting global sustainability goals, climate change mitigation, global warming, and deforestation reduction. We showed that CBc were participating more in forest diplomacy rounds under a ‘stop me before I kill again’ perspective than because of a constructive approach to forest diplomacy. Notably, Northern countries on their side were sponsoring CBc because of a ‘throw good money after bad’ motivation. They mainly cared about not being blamed by Western civil society actors as being major drivers of global warming because of their industrialization.

Regarding further informal interests embedded within this ‘blame avoidance’, we also observed that CBc have been able to exploit their weaknesses through a set of ‘cunning government’ tactics [29] to get international funding as part of the available ‘environmental rent’ from global climate change and forest-related governance regimes. As far as Northern countries are concerned, we observed that they were implicitly looking within the Congo Basin for potential new green technology markets. This supports the arguments of Friedman who thinks that green governmentality, and most especially green capitalism, is the major objective of developed countries within global environmental governance [49]. In the same vein, we pointed out a significant risk of conflict of interest regarding consulting firms which supposedly were hired to provide technical assistance to CBc but concluded their work by capitulating in front of their clients’ informal interests for the sake of keeping their jobs.

From a more constructive perspective, for CBc to succeed and carry more weight in future forest diplomacy negotiations, a good starting point would consist of shifting their behavior from a blame avoidance approach and employing cunning positions to an autonomous and self-confident approach. This includes development of their own strategic and technical negotiation skills to substantially reduce their current heavy dependence on cooperation agencies and consulting firms. Secondly, it is an open secret that transnational forest-related organizations such as COMIFAC, which represent CBc in forest diplomacy negotiations, suffer from a lack of finances and highly qualified human resources. This situation is mainly due to the fact that CBc rarely pay their membership fees to these organizations, and do not really want them to be independent vis-à-vis governments of

member states. This is particularly the case with COMIFAC. By tackling this issue as a priority in building a strong regional forest regime, CBc and related state bureaucracies and allies would have made a significant step forward in reducing financial dependency of those countries vis-à-vis external actors (including cooperation agencies and consulting firms). In the same vein, reinforcing regional forest-related organizations would boost the ability of CBc to successfully foster the interests of their nations in forest diplomacy negotiations while contributing to achieving global sustainability goals.

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Conflicts of Interest: This manuscript has not been published or submitted elsewhere in part or in entirety and is not under consideration by another journal. All study participants provided informed consent, and the study design was approved by the appropriate ethics review board. We have read and understood your journal's policies, and we believe that neither the manuscript nor the study violates any of these. There are no conflicts of interest to declare.

Appendix A

Table A1. List of interviewees.

Interview Number	Position of the Interviewee	Institution/Country	Date	Place
Interview 1	Country delegate	Ministry of Forestry Issues/Cameroon	8 May 2017	Bonn
Interview 2	Country delegate	Ministry of Forestry/Gabon	8 May 2017	Bonn
Interview 3	Country delegate	Ministry of Forestry Issues/Congo	8 May 2017	Bonn
Interview 4	Country delegate	Ministry of Forestry Issues/Central Africa Republic	9 May 2017	Bonn
Interview 5	Country delegate	Ministry of Forestry Issues/Democratic Republic of Congo	10 May 2017	Bonn
Interview 6	Country delegate	Ministry of Forestry Issues/Rwanda	10 May 2017	Bonn
Interview 7	Country delegate	Ministry of Forestry Issues/Sao-Tome Principe	11 May 2017	Bonn
Interview 8	Country delegate	Ministry of Forestry Issues/Chad	11 May 2017	Bonn
Interview 9	Regional expert	COMIFAC	12 May 2017	Bonn
Interview 10	Regional expert	COMIFAC	28 August 2017	Brazzaville
Interview 11	Northern cooperation agencies	JICA/Cameroon	29 August 2017	Brazzaville
Interview 12	Northern cooperation agencies	GIZ/COMIFAC	29 August 2017	Brazzaville
Interview 13	Northern cooperation agencies	GIZ/COMIFAC	29 August 2017	Brazzaville
Interview 14	Northern cooperation agencies	GIZ/Cameroon	8 November 2017	Bonn
Interview 15	International bureaucracies	UNFCCC Secretariat	8 November 2017	Bonn
Interview 16	International bureaucracies	UNFCCC/Secretariat	9 November 2017	Bonn
Interview 17	Consultancy cabinet	SABKOF	9 November 2017	Bonn
Interview 18	Consultancy cabinet	SABKOF	9 November 2017	Bonn
Interview 19	Cooperation agencies	GIZ/Cameroon	10 November 2017	Bonn
Interview 20	Cooperation agencies	GIZ/Cameroon	10 December 2017	Bonn

Appendix B

Main interviews and group discussion guide

Introduction: Identification and familiarization

Component 1: Role within the forest negotiation processes (fnp)

- (i) What is your position within fnp?
- (ii) What type of contribution do you bring (technical, financial, diplomatically)?
- (iii) Since when are you taking part to these fnp?

Component 2: Expectancies

- (iv) Why are you participating to these fnp?
- (v) What are your delegation objectives?
- (vi) Do you have any unveiled, informal, private, national, informal objective to foster?
- (vii) Do you trust other negotiation groups in their engagement in meeting global sustainability objectives?
- (viii) Do you think you will meet your objectives (formal or informal) by the end of the fnp?

Component 3: Frustrations

- (ix) Do you have any frustration about how the negotiations are organized?
- (x) Do you have any frustration about how your own group functions?
- (xi) Do you have any frustration about the other negotiation groups' moves?
- (xii) How do you communicate within your negotiation group and with other groups?

Component 4: Recommendations

- (xiii) Do you have any recommendation for your own groups for the future fnp?
- (xiv) Do you have any recommendation for other groups with whom you are involved in negotiation for the future fnp?
- (xv) Do you think that the transferred expertise will be utilized in different policies of the sub-region?

Component 5: Ways forward

- (xvi) Would you qualify the SCB experience as successful?
- (xvii) Which recommendations can you provide for future initiatives?

Appendix C

Table A2. List of selected institutional acronyms.

Acronyms	Signification
MINFOF	Ministry of Forest and Wildlife
MINEED	Ministry of Environment, Ecology and Sustainable Development
MINFO	Ministry of Forestry
MINFOR	Ministry of Forest
MINDEV	Ministry of Development
MINEV	Ministry of Environment
COMIFAC PREREDD	Central African Forest Commission Regional REDD+ project sponsored by the World Bank in the Congo Basin

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