

‘Conservation Timber,’ wood with a story!

A year and a half ago, Stichting Probos was asked to use its knowledge and contacts to develop a market for ‘conservation timber’ as part of the Cities4Forests program. This has resulted in partnerships between the municipalities of Amsterdam and Rotterdam and forest communities in Suriname, Bolivia, Guyana, and Guatemala. Conservation timber from these community forests is being used for various applications, including benches, boardwalks, and bicycle and pedestrian bridges. In this article, you will read why and how Probos is working on this initiative.



*In Rotterdam, the first 'Beterbank' made from conservation timber from South America was opened
(Photo: Mark van Benthem, Probos)*

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Context

About 36% of the remaining intact forest landscapes worldwide are managed by local communities. Numerous studies have shown that community management is a highly effective form of nature conservation. Deforestation rates are much lower in areas inhabited by indigenous communities. The significant role of community forest management in combating large-scale deforestation, with all its consequences, calls for greater understanding and appreciation of community forest management, including timber harvesting. However, these forest communities often find it challenging to secure a market for their products. This is where the concept of 'conservation timber' and the Cities4Forests (C4F) program come into play.

While tropical forests managed by local residents have a substantial stock and potential for the sustainable harvest of high-quality timber, they have little or no access to the international timber market. The C4F partner forest program, initiated by the system thinkers of Pilot Projects, is based on supplying 'conservation timber' (see Box 1) for small-scale public infrastructure, such as street furniture, bridges, and boardwalks, to the city they collaborate with. C4F aims to foster sustainable trade between European cities and communities in the tropics.

Probos is dedicated to more, better, and sustainable management and use of forests and trees, both near and far. Specifically concerning timber from tropical forests, Probos maps trade flows and encourages responsible sourcing, thereby promoting sustainable forest management and conservation timber.

As part of the C4F program, Probos has established and coordinated the conservation timber value chains for the cities of Amsterdam and Rotterdam. To make the city-community collaboration successful, intermediate partners are also necessary, including sawmills, exporters, and importers. Probos is not a 'timber trader' but works with market parties to ensure the creation of a functioning value chain that will continue to operate independently in the long run. In the countries where the timber is harvested, Probos works closely with local partners.

Ensuring sustainable forest management

Governments in the Netherlands are required to procure 100% sustainably. Therefore, conservation timber for municipalities must demonstrably come from sustainably managed forests. However, the partner community with which Amsterdam collaborates (Bigi Poika in Suriname) is not yet sustainably certified. Consequently, the certification process is part of the project. In collaboration with FSC Netherlands, preparations and training for certification have begun, utilizing the relatively new

BOX 1: CONSERVATION TIMBER

Conservation timber is timber sourced from forests managed by local communities, supporting the long-term preservation of these forests. For these communities, the forest is crucial not only for their daily lives but also as a source of income. The selling of timber often plays a significant role in this context. By using conservation timber, cities and other players contribute to the preservation of these forests and to the livelihoods of the people who live and work there. Through the C4F program, Probos, together with local service providers and other partners like FSC national offices, promotes the use of conservation timber by fostering 'forest partnerships' between European cities and communities in the tropics, based on the purchase and use of conservation timber. These conservation timber partnerships have recently also been established in The Netherlands: Amsterdam now buys timber from a community in Suriname, and Rotterdam from communities in Guatemala, Guyana, and Bolivia. Probos supports these initiatives and collaborates with FSC Netherlands to further ensure sustainability where needed. By using this timber, the story of the community is told, highlighting the importance of the forest and its products to the community.



The Bigi Poika Community forest in Suriname, supplying the conservation timber for the city of Amsterdam (Photo: Mark van Benthem, Probos)

FSC Continuous Improvement Procedure (CIP, FSC-PRO-30-011). This is a step-by-step certification procedure (see Box 2), specifically designed for FSC-certification of small forest owners and community forests. The CIP procedure is not yet widely applied, and its implementation is still pioneering work. Probos, together with local partners and various FSC experts, has developed CIP training, pre-audit, and gap analysis for the forest management of the Surinamese community Bigi Poika. This has

generated important knowledge that can also be applied elsewhere.

The Rotterdam Case

Until recently, the municipality of Rotterdam used a single timber species for the approximately 300 benches installed annually. As part of the C4F program, Rotterdam has developed the 'Beterbank' (Better-bench). The Beterbank combines the city's sustainability ambitions with an attractive design for a new urban bench made from six different, partly lesser-known, tropical timber species. Initially, 50 Beterbanken will be placed throughout Rotterdam. The first bench was installed in March 2024 at Westerkade 31, where it can be admired and tested.

The timber species used for the Beterbank come from FSC-certified community forests in Bolivia and Guyana. The species names are engraved on the bench. From Bolivia, the species are Garapa and Marfim, sourced from the 468,000 hectare CINMA-San Martin forest concession in Bajo Paragua managed by Dekma Bolivia. In Guyana, the species are Jatoba, Massaranduba, and Angelim Pedra, from the FSC-certified concessions of Iwokrama. Iwokrama is a 371,000 hectare natural landscape working in a 60-year rotation.



Boardwalk of Conservation Timber from Selva Maya (Pucté) in production for use in Rotterdam (Photo: Arjan De Jong, GWW Houtimport)

BOX 2: THE FSC CONTINUOUS IMPROVEMENT PROCEDURE (CIP)

The FSC Continuous Improvement Procedure (CIP) is specifically designed for the FSC certification of small-scale (community) forests. The CIP procedure generally includes the following steps:

1. A 'self-conformity' check of the current situation to assess compliance with the indicators of the FSC standard, initially focusing mainly on the 'Core Criteria' (CC).
2. When the community meets the CC, a plan must be developed describing how the community can achieve conformity with the 'Continuous Improvement Criteria' (CIC) over the next five years.
3. The community undergoes an initial audit by a recognized auditor to assess compliance with the CC and the plan for the CIC. Upon approval, the community is allowed to carry the FSC label.
4. An interim audit is conducted after three years, and a final audit after five years to assess whether the community now meets both the CC and the CIC. If so, the community retains the FSC label.

to investigate which timber species have the best properties for broader application within the Municipality of Rotterdam. The idea is to test more species as well. The different timber species are being monitored to assess their performance in public spaces, considering factors such as weather and usage. A QR code on the benches allows users to provide feedback and learn more about the forest communities.

Additionally, in Rotterdam, a boardwalk made of conservation timber has been constructed at Bergsche Voorplas. This boardwalk is made of the timber species Pucté, sourced from the FSC-certified community of Carmelita in the Selva Maya (Guatemala) and supplied by Precious Woods.

For a detailed description of the different forest communities involved in the C4F program, see the [Partner Forest website](#).

The Amsterdam case

The Surinamese village of Bigi Poika is an indigenous village located in the Para district, with a 15,684 hectare community

forest under management. Due to limited disturbances, the forest still qualifies as (semi-) natural forest, boasting a rich and unique biodiversity. This underscores the importance of sustainable forest management within the community forest of Bigi Poika. For a comprehensive description of Bigi Poika, including photos and videos, it's worth reading [this \(photo\)report](#).

The traditional leadership and forestry team of the village are collaborating with Probos and its Surinamese partner ESS (Environmental Services & Support) on sustainable forest management. This includes various training sessions and the community's selling of timber to the city of Amsterdam. Probos has initiated the FSC-CIP with Bigi Poika, and we have reached the stage of the first 'conformity self-check,' providing valuable insight into their progress towards FSC-CIP certification. The Bigi Poika village leadership has forestry experience in FSC-certified concessions. In the community forest, the legal and administrative requirements for certification remain challenging.



Probos advisors Sietze van Dijk and Eli Prins, along with the village leadership of Bigi Poika and ESS consultant Giani Razab Sekh, during an FSC-CIP working session in the village of Bigi Poika. (Photo: Eli Prins)

So far, the harvest plan has been approved, the trees have been felled, extracted, and transported to the sawmill in Paramaribo, where they are cut to the specified dimensions for Amsterdam. As part of this initial shipment from Bigi Poika to Amsterdam, the timber species Wana (*Sextonia rubra*) will mainly be shipped, intended for park benches in Amsterdam's public spaces. Through the partnership between the city and the community, the residents of Bigi Poika know where their wood is going and how it will be used. In turn, the residents of Amsterdam gain insight into the origin of the wood they are using.

Besides Amsterdam and Rotterdam, other cities including Copenhagen, Turin, Galway, Glasgow, and recently Paris have also joined the C4F program.

What have we learned?

While the market share of conservation timber remains small, this does not mean that the regular timber trade does not see any potential for it. However, doing business with local communities is challenging

and often requires endurance, more than the one and a half years we have been involved so far. Communities are often unfamiliar with Western business practices, and cultural differences and mutual misunderstandings often result in disappointment and frustration. Initiatives like C4F help build mutual understanding and trust. Continuity is also crucial for building mutual trust. Currently, Probos is working on new initiatives to safeguard the established value chains and build new ones.

The role of a local project partner is crucial in communicating with communities. For this reason, in addition to the time it takes to gain the trust of local communities, Probos has also invested a lot of time in building working relationships with local liaisons, such as ESS in Suriname and Rainforest Alliance in Selva Maya.

In such early trade relationships, expectations should not be too high. Timber volumes are initially modest; for both Amsterdam and Rotterdam, it's only a few cubic meters of sawn product for the first

delivery. However, with this, we have been able to demonstrate to both cities that it is possible, what the potential can be, and what the positive impact on the village community is. The cities are very enthusiastic about this.

How do we move forward?

The C4F program has demonstrated what the possibilities are for the use of conservation timber and the contribution it can make to promoting sustainable forest management, local employment, income, and community development. With the support of the Inter-American Development Bank (IDB), Probos is now collaborating with local partners and Surinamese inland communities to broaden this concept. This includes not only timber and timber products but also the development of a market for lesser-known timber species (LKTS) and forest-related ecosystem services.

Additionally, Probos is working on developing local competencies for sustainable forest management within the communities. This includes creating awareness of certification processes, such as FSC-CIP, and locally processing the logs using a mobile sawmill. By developing these competencies within the communities, more value can be created locally, and the value chain can be shortened.

We continue to work with local partners and are reaching out to key stakeholders on the demand side to build lasting relationships based on mutual trust and create positive impact. Not only on the forest, but also on the people dependent on the forest. Interested parties may contact the authors.

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