
Congo (Democratic Republic): NGOs press for peoples' rights at Forest Forum

On February 15, 2006, Kinshasa was the venue of a National Forest Forum where global financial institutions, government authorities, environmental experts, human rights campaigners and local people discussed ways to protect the rainforests of the Democratic Republic of Congo (formerly Zaire), the world's second largest after the Amazon.

National and international NGOs participated in the event reaffirming the need for a sustainable management of forest ecosystems in the DRC, respectful of the rights and interests of local communities.

The declaration of national organizations gathered in the Réseau Ressources Naturelles (Natural Resources Network) declared: "At the latest Forum, we conveyed our concerns about the local communities' and indigenous peoples' rights and interests, and about the preservation of our forest ecosystems, currently endangered and sacrificed by a forest policy essentially focused on industrial timber exploitation."

The NGOs supported the Presidential Decree of May 2002 which introduced a moratorium on the allocation of new forestry concessions, but at the same time denounced its violation by the Government. Though in 2005 there was another decree reaffirming the validity of the moratorium, the national NGOs said that lack of control and impunity had rendered the decree a dead letter.

In a statement, national NGOs exposed that government partners like the FAO and the World Bank (WB) have acted in disregard of indigenous peoples interests. The NGOs supported the development of comprehensive new forestry laws in the country, and challenged the "zoning" of DRC's entire forest area which would imply some 60 million hectares being opened up to logging companies: "The zoning, which was intended to be participatory, is still casually done, although the entire process rests upon it. The non-consultation of local communities and indigenous peoples clearly shows that the principle of free and prior consent has been given up. We similarly denounce some steps taken by the Congolese government and its partners, such as FAO, which undertook the task of disseminating the Forest Law in a simplified manner without taking into account neither the size of the country nor the need to reach the most concerned people." "This criticism includes the World Bank, which knowingly declined to enforce its own policies and guidelines on forests and indigenous peoples. After a number of steps and remarks to the World Bank on this matter, the Pygmy indigenous organizations and support organizations were forced to submit the matter to the Bank's Inspection Panel, in order to bring the Bank to change its policy in Democratic Republic of Congo."

In support of the national NGOs, several international NGOs, on their part, suggested "the immediate and severe punishment of all logging companies that have violated the moratorium, including an immediate halt to their illegal operations, cancelling their other logging titles and banning them from operating on Congolese soil".

The need for participatory zoning was another priority action suggested by the international NGOs,

with the recommendation that “a participatory zoning plan also be implemented as a sine qua non condition for the lifting of the moratorium, aimed at recognising the traditional rights of local communities, including indigenous peoples, on the basis of the principle of free, prior and informed consent”. As part of the active involvement of local communities, they also recommended that “the different processes for formulating implementing measures for the Forestry Code should be undertaken in such a way as to enable the rights of local communities, including indigenous peoples, to be taken into account”.

Reaffirming their “commitment to work together, alongside local communities, with partners motivated to achieve the sustainable management of the DRC’s forests, respectful of the rights and interests of local communities, including indigenous peoples”, international NGOs support the demand of the Réseau Ressources Naturelles that states: “We repeat our demand that the Government and its partners develop different alternatives to industrial timber exploitation, as well as the application of mechanisms for community forest management, prioritizing studies on non timber forest products. This is an approach much more likely to ensure the protection of our forest ecosystem and to achieve more success in the poverty alleviation programme”.

The DRC NGO statement to Forest Forum is available (in French) at <http://www.rainforestfoundationuk.org/s-DRC%20NGO%20statement%20to%20Forest%20Forum%20-%20February%202006>.

The International NGO statement to DRC Forest Forum is available at <http://www.rainforestfoundationuk.org/s-Int.%20NGO%20statement%20to%20DRC%20Forest%20Forum%20-%20February%202006%20-%20English>.