
Democratic Republic of Congo: After the war, the fight for the forest

Following decades of despotic rule by Mobutu Sese Seko, the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC, formerly Zaire) descended into a 'civil war' that claimed the lives of an estimated 3.5 million people. The mass carnage which reigned over the country has receded – though many believe only temporarily. The war has, at least in part, been fuelled by competition for control over natural resources.

Forest people such as the Twa 'Pygmies' of eastern DRC have suffered traumatic impacts during the conflict. As well as brutal treatment - including cases of cannibalism and reported 'genocide' - at the hands of one faction or another, Pygmy people have also suffered from a depletion of wild food resources, which have been exploited by armies, militias and the millions of refugees fleeing from the conflict.

With the establishment of the transitional government in 2003, the international community has quickly moved to rebuild the country's economy; forests are seen as a potential source of quick foreign earnings.

DRC's forests cover an area of 1.3 million square kilometres, more than twice the size of France. According to World Bank estimates, some 35 million people (nearly 70% of the national population) are resident within, or to some extent dependent on, the country's forests. Most are Bantu farmers, many of whom still practice traditional rotational farming or 'forest gardening'; a smaller number are Mbuti, Twa, and other 'Pygmy' hunter-gatherers.

As of today, relatively little of the forest has been exploited industrially, although a few (mostly foreign) companies have had access to large areas for logging, such as the German group, Danzer, which has held logging concessions extending over 2.4 million hectares. In some areas, forest has been converted to farmlands, mostly for subsistence, and around major cities, collection of fuelwood has also led to loss of forest cover. However, compared to other parts of west and central Africa, deforestation rates have remained low. Under the guidance of the international community, this could be about to change.

In August 2002, a new Forest Code was adopted by the (unelected) Interim Government of DRC. The Code sets out the basic 'framework' for the DRC Government's forest policy, such as that the government continues to assert state ownership over all areas of forest. The development and adoption of the Code was supported financially by the World Bank, and was broadly modelled on the Forest Law that the Bank developed for Cameroon in 1994. Subsequently, both the Bank and UN FAO have also started projects to 'zone' DRC's forests, eventually parcelling the country's entire forest area into areas for logging, conservation, and other uses.

The World Bank has taken some positive steps to reform the timber industry in DRC, for example, by pressing the Government to cancel certain existing logging contracts, and revoke 6 million hectares of concessions allocated illegally.

However, internal Bank documents obtained by the Rainforest Foundation reveal that the Bank's ultimate intention is a massive expansion of the country's timber industry. A 60-100-fold increase of timber production to around 6-10 million cubic metres of timber per year is foreseen, with an area of some 60 million hectares (somewhat larger than the size of France) being put up for grabs. Bank documents refer to the "creation of a favourable climate for industrial logging".

The proposed 'development' of DRC's forests, and the way in which this is being undertaken, presents a number of serious dangers.

Firstly, the World Bank and FAO have failed to take account of the highly unstable situation in Congolese politics, and the serious weaknesses of the government. The authorities in Kinshasa, the capital, are, as yet, unable to exercise any meaningful control over the activities of logging companies.

Secondly, the World Bank's approach to the development of DRC's forests appears to be based on the assumption that the expansion of industrial logging will necessarily bring economic benefits to the country's poor people (measured by average income per capita, DRC's people are the world's poorest). However, there is very little evidence that this assumption is valid. In fact, the evidence from countries such as Cameroon has been that communities living in the forest - often the poorest of the poor - are further impoverished, as the logging industry can destroy resources upon which they depend for their very subsistence, including small-scale forest farms, supplies of fresh water, wild game, fruits and oils, and natural medicines. The development of a large-scale logging industry in DRC could therefore have serious negative impacts on millions of poor people.

Thirdly, the approach being taken by the Bank also appears not to recognise that, as elsewhere in Africa, communities that have been present for hundreds or even thousands of years claim large areas of Congo's forests under 'traditional rights'. The experience from countries such as Cameroon has been that, the failure to properly recognise local peoples rights and claims when 're-zoning' forest areas and allocating logging concessions, can result in serious, persistent and violent social conflict.

On the 2nd of December, 2003, the Rainforest Foundation wrote a detailed letter to the World Bank, seeking clarification about its involvement in forestry in DRC, and raising the concerns noted above. At the time of writing this article - exactly one year later - we have still received no substantive response.

In the intervening time, it has become clear that the Bank is under heavy pressure from logging companies - especially, perhaps, from French and German interests, who may stand to gain most from a 'reinvigoration' of the Congolese timber industry. Whilst the Bank has emphasised its concern that the development of DRC's forests should benefit the people living there, it has done nothing to put this concern into practice. Instead, it has continued with an extraordinarily naïve belief that, amidst a state of near-civil war, with a government that is largely only that in name and which mostly serves the personal vested interests of its members, with financial institutions known to be utterly corrupt, and basic functions of governance still fragile -at best-, it would still be possible to establish a timber industry that would be environmentally acceptable, socially sound, and economically beneficial.

Few observers believe that this is anything other than ideological dogma endorsed by promotion-hungry junior Bank officials who will ultimately be unaccountable for their actions.

In November 2004, a unique alliance of international NGOs, including the Rainforest Foundation,

Greenpeace, WWF, the Wildlife Conservation Society (WCS), Conservation International and the African Wildlife Foundation, issued a joint statement calling for a moratorium on the issuing of any new logging contracts in DRC until such time as certain strict conditions are upheld. These conditions include that the recognition of local peoples' 'free, prior and informed consent', be made conditional to any changes in the use of forests during the new zoning process.

At the end of 2004, the forests of the Democratic Republic of Congo remain as the largest relatively undisturbed rainforests on Earth. The international community has a momentous opportunity to explore and implement new approaches instead of those that have so dismally failed in other parts of the world. As an immediate priority, the Rainforest Foundation believes that the international community, especially the World Bank, should ensure that the existing moratorium on new logging in the Congo is strictly upheld.

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