
[Democratic Republic of Congo: World Bank behind logging interests](#)

On February 12, more than 100 environment, development and human rights groups in the war-ravaged Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) have formed a unique alliance to oppose the “development” of the country’s rainforests, which could include a vast increase in industrial logging.

The social network sent a letter to the Minister for the Environment, Waters and Forests, the World Bank Resident Representative, and the FAO Representative, expressing their concern regarding the future of the country’s forests and the people living within these forests. Covering around 1.3 million square kilometres, the rainforests of the Democratic Republic of Congo are the largest in the world after Amazonia, and have so far largely been spared extensive destruction. An estimated 35 million people live in and around these forests, including Bantu farmers, and Twa and Mbuti hunter-gatherer ‘Pygmies’.

The Congo NGOs called on the World Bank to halt or change projects that will lead to the parcelling out of tens of millions of hectares of Congo’s rainforest to logging companies. They express that forest zoning is a critical process that will determine the legal relationship linking the people to the forests, and may thus affect the subsistence resource rights of millions of people living in the DRC’s forests.

The letter exposes the lack of participation of civil society: “Thus far, local consultations on defining a methodology and criteria for dividing up the country have only involved the State departments and the private sector. Civil society has been sidelined in a process which is deciding, at this very moment, and without our contribution, the fate of our country’s ecological heritage and the future of its people. These are people whose subsistence and very existence depend directly on their access to the resources and benefits of a sustainable management of their forests. This lack of consultation and involvement of civil society heralds the establishment of a forestry policy that is devoid of all popular legitimacy. This policy thus risks being rejected by the population and creating innumerable social conflicts.”

The World Bank was closely involved with the development and adoption of the new forestry laws in the DRC (Law No. 011-2002 on the Forestry Code), and along with the United Nations Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO), is supporting the development of comprehensive new laws that will implement this Code. Both agencies are also involved in preparing a national forest zoning plan, which will serve to define areas for logging, conservation and community use. However, internal World Bank documents obtained by the international NGO Rainforest Foundation reveal that the Bank is aiming to “create a favourable climate for industrial logging” in the Congo, and envisages a 60-fold increase in the country’s timber production which could affect up to 60 million hectares of the DRC’s rainforest (an area the size of France).

The social groups challenge the Forestry Code for not complying with all the DRC’s obligations deriving from various international treaties, including article 8(j) of the Convention on Biological Diversity; for taking insufficient account of the specific needs of forest-dependent communities and for failing to take account of the lessons learned from application of similar forestry legislation in

Cameroon.

In their letter, the NGOs demand that the management of DRC's forests must under no account be guided by the hypothesis that the development of industrial forest activity necessarily contributes to the development of the people, nor of its most disadvantaged sectors.

They require the implementation of urgent measures, including:

- * The immediate adoption of a moratorium on the process for elaborating the Forestry Code's implementation decrees.
- * An increase in the number of civil society representatives on the Steering Committee for FAO Project TCP/DRC/2905 from three (3) to six (6).
- * The traditional and customary rights and practices of local communities must be effectively and systematically taken into account in the process of elaborating the implementing measures, as well as in the development of the National Forestry Plan and, in particular, the zoning plan.
- * The World Bank and the FAO must ensure that their interventions in the DRC are in accordance with international law, with the obligations resulting from international conventions on the protection of human rights or the environment and with the Constitution of the DRC.

Article based on information from: "Congo's 'civil society' unites to oppose threats to forests and peoples rights", Rainforest Foundation Press Release, 1st March 2004, Letter by the Congo NGOs sent to the Minister for the Environment, Waters and Forests in Kinshasa – Gombe, the World Bank Resident Representative and the FAO Representative, Kinshasa, 12 February 2004; "World Bank oversees the carve-up of Congo's rainforests: 60-fold increase in logging planned", Press Release, e-mail: jbbobia@yahoo.fr ; Simon Counsell, Rainforest Foundation, e-mail: simonc@rainforestuk.com, sent by ECOTERRA International, e-mail: mailhub@ecoterra.net