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## Republic of Congo: expansion of tree plantations linked to the carbon market - the underside of an opaque business and greenwashing

Oil and gas industries represent the main source of global emissions. (1) Instead of reducing their emissions, they take advantage of human concern about climate change to promote misleading plans for the expansion of tree planting as a solution to offsetting their emissions. (2) In a vicious circle, very opaque plantation projects are developing, generating new sources of income for plantation companies and providing multinationals a justification to continue to pollute. Twenty years earlier, organizations were already sounding the alarm over greenwashing claims that the expansion of plantations could offset carbon emissions. (3) The devastating effects of these projects, however, do not appear in the advertising messages.

In the Republic of Congo, reforestation projects began in 1936, after colonial destruction. (4) A National Reforestation Service was created and a national afforestation and reforestation program put in place to install one million hectares of plantations. (5) In 2013, the country launched its first carbon project as part of the REDD+ process, the financing of which has not yet been resolved. (6) The expansion of carbon projects initiated by private entities begins in 2019, after several reforms including the revision of the Forest Code, the adoption of a REDD+ strategy and the establishment of a Carbon Task Force. (7)

In the space of four years, between 2019 and 2023, seven long-term lease contracts were concluded between the government and the extractive industries for a total of approximately 570,000 hectares- an area larger than the country of Luxembourg (see the map).

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Among the signatories of these lease contracts are European multinationals operating in the country and the consultancy firm Forest Management Resource (FRM). FRM is the pioneer of carbon plantation projects in Congo and is now associated with the majority of multinationals, with its omnipresence carrying the scent of mixing roles and conflicts of interest.

Let's come first to the contracts, these are lease contracts for land the state inherited from the colonial era, this time leased out for the development of carbon compensation projects, thus encouraging the continuity of carbon pollution. This lease contract system presents a colonial reconquest of agricultural land obtained through colonial heritage (9), in a very opaque and non-consensual approach. The architecture of this approach is generally characterized by the absence of a framework to make the lease contracts public, thus reinforcing opacity of information that ought to be public. Specifically, we note the absence of community consultation before the start of certain projects. (10) This has been strongly criticized in several carbon projects developed around the world.

Concerning the area granted, these plantation projects are developing in a logic of land grabbing in which the government facilitates the lease of land it claims to be the "public domain of the State", under the law n°9-2004 of March 26 2004. But this claim of the State remains contested, especially since articles 2, 5 and 23 of the Constitution of October 25, 2015 advocate that national sovereignty is vested in the people. Another thing to note is that the ratio between the area granted in the leases and that targeted for plantations does not match. In fact, the total area to be planted adds up to 380,000 hectares out of the 570,000 hectares granted in leases. This raises the question about the use of those portions of land which these projects do not mention.

In addition to opaque information and land grabbing, we also note the use of misleading and seductive terms such as carbon neutrality and the promise of job creation for communities. According to various studies, monoculture tree plantations actually have a low sequestration potential compared to that of forests; monocultures also consume large quantities of water and negatively affect natural ecosystems. (11) In essence, to set up the plantations, all or part of the existing vegetation is destroyed in order to compensate for oil emissions.

Now, it is important to understand the impact of the expansion of these projects on forest-dependent communities and what is behind these projects.

## **FRM COFOR: communities question an opaque carbon market**

In 2019, Forêt Ressources Management, created a subsidiary called Congo Forest Plantation (COFOR), a company under Congolese law. The same year, it signed a long-term lease contract with the government of Congo to develop the reforestation at Madingou-Kayes. The company is currently developing four projects with its investors. Interviewed by the Makanisi blog, the owner of the company stated that the projects will establish acacia-cassava and eucalyptus plantations, develop a sawmilling and plywood sector with an attractive promise of creating thousands jobs for communities. (12) Another objective of the project is to contribute to climate change mitigation through plantations. (13)

But the reality looks very different. Madingou-Kayes communities interviewed state that "we do not

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have access to either the lease contract or the project document. We are even surprised to hear that there are carbon projects here. All we know is not to enter this forest...". Apart from the lack of information, the consent of the communities was evidently not obtained before the start of the project.

## **BACASI: greenwashing, violence against communities, a useless project for the country**

The BaCaSi project is a partnership of several entities, among others: French oil company Total Energies and the company Forêt Ressources Management, via its Congolese subsidiary Forest Neutral Congo and the Republic of Congo. The project aims to develop a 40,000-hectare monoculture plantation within a project area of 55,000 hectares (14), while paradoxically, the area conceded as lease in 2022 is 70,089 hectares. This raises questions about other unstated objectives of the project.

In addition, the project is said to involve 'a partnership based on advanced local agriculture and forestry, serving integrated development and climate action, with co-benefits such as jobs as well as social projects in the areas of nutrition, health and education.' (14)

However, research by local and international organizations has revealed that this is a very controversial project. In particular, farmers and indigenous populations were ordered to leave their land, an indication of the project's grabbing policy, some land-owning communities also received low compensation from the authorities (some at a rate of one dollar per hectare) and lost their livelihoods, which reinforces their food insecurity and poverty. (15) The revelations about the Bakasi project do not stop there. "Because this is not only be about carbon credits, the plantation in reality will only offset 2 percent of the carbon emissions of the oil company Total Energies, so behind this operation, is a question of money and not a question of corporate philanthropy" remarks a human rights defender who concludes that this project is not useful for the Republic of Congo.

## **Sequoia plantation: wood processing and opaque credit ambition**

After multiple attempts to develop a destructive plantation project which has been held in check by communities and civil society in Gabon (16, see also article in this bulletin), the company Séquoia Plantations found refuge in the Republic of Congo, thanks to significant support granted by the authorities, declared one of the company's managers. (17) Sequoia, founded by the multinational OLAM, is now part of the Equitane group, based in Dubai. Two lease contracts have been concluded for two projects currently under development: a 36,000-hectare replanting project was granted in May 2023 and the 69,000-hectare project obtained a lease in 2022, representing a total investment of 96.5 million Euros. (18)

Although according to the project document (19), the project focus is on the establishment of new tree plantations, plantation wood is already being harvested and processed at the site, thus raising questions about adding new to old plantations. Indeed, comments by the company manager point to objectives beyond those acknowledged in the project documents. During an interview (19), the manager suggested that his company will carry out large-scale plantations, with a view to fighting climate change and while reducing their carbon footprint. On the other hand, a resident of Mandingou-Kaye denounces the lack of accessibility to the lease contract and a consultation process tailored to local authorities. It is important to ultimately establish the existence of an unacknowledged carbon agenda and that the projects were developed with only partial information available.

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## **ECO ZAMBA : excessive opportunism and unpredictable impacts**

EcoZamba is a project of the National Oil Company of Congo, taking place in the savannah zone of the Congo Plateau. A 30-year lease contract was concluded in 2024 with the government. The contract grants the company the use of 168,720 hectares of land. Afforestation and agroforestry projects said to cover 50,000 hectares aim, among other things, at the sale of carbon credits. (20)

Some NGOs are skeptical about the impacts of this project on communities and the environment. According to them, “reforestation is not the priority oil companies. Their calling is to produce and market oil. They are launching into a sector that is not theirs. It’s out of simple opportunism. Environmentally, we are losing our savannah ecosystem with impacts on animals, birds and insects that can only thrive in savannah areas.” The cost of financing the project has not been revealed, and neither has the lease contract been made public. (21)

## **RENCO : the Mbé carbon garden project**

The government of the Republic of Congo and the company RENCO GREEN SARLU, a subsidiary of the Italian multinational RENCO SPA, signed a partnership agreement on July 28, 2023 as part of the Carbone-Mbé Garden initiative. The project aims to establish acacia plantations on 40,050 hectares and market the carbon of the planted trees. Project plans include the proposal to establish 1,200 hectares of agroforestry plantations for the benefit of communities, following an “Acacia-Manioc” agroforestry model, with the plan to set up one hundred and fifty (150) hectares per year and rotations of eight years. (22)

The existing law grants exclusivity of the carbon credits generated in the plantations established on the lease lands that are part of the State forest domain to the private company that holds the lease. Thus, ultimately, the project does not provide for any benefit sharing plan from the carbon sold with the communities.

Additional carbon projects have been awarded in the Republic of Congo, in the forestry and conservation industry sectors. Among others, the forest industry of Ouessou (23); the logging companies Congolaise Industrielle de Bois and Yuan Dong Forestry Company, and the conservation NGO Wildlife Conservation Society have been awarded permits for carbon projects. (24) Also, African Park Network, manager of the Odzala-Kokoua National Park, has expressed its intention to diversify its field of activity into carbon credits. (25)

Ultimately, the interest of oil extraction companies remains to continue to extract fossil fuels, as well as to do business in the carbon market, which provides a double benefit for them. (26) To do this, they develop deceptive projects, seduce communities and use very opaque approaches. Meanwhile, the roots of the problem remain intact, including: climate change caused by the use of fossil fuels and communities lacking access and protection of their customary lands. So, no matter how large it is, no tree plantation will ever be able to absorb the carbon emitted by oil activities and will never solve the problems of communities dependent on land and forests.

## **Bernadin Yassine NGOUMBA, defender of human rights and the environment, and the WRM**

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