

Strengthening voices for better choices in the Democratic Republic of Congo

When all voices are heard, forest stakeholders work together

Overview of forest governance

The forests of the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) cover 134 million hectares, almost 60% of its land area and more than twice the size of France. They form a complex patchwork of ecosystems at the heart of Africa's forest zone, harbouring a rich but largely unexplored biodiversity. They also feature prominently in the lives of Congolese people as a major source of food, medicine, shelter, energy and income.

DRC lacks reliable national statistics on forest change, but is estimated to have lost an average of 319,000 hectares of forest (0.2%) each year between 2000 and 2005. This loss, due mainly to slash-and-burn agriculture and fuelwood collection, is modest compared with other African countries, reflecting DRC's limited infrastructure and recent history of conflict and insecurity.

As peace and development replace war and mismanagement, the value of DRC's forests is growing and the risk is rising of an unregulated expansion of industrial logging. Locally there have been frequent conflicts between logging companies and communities over the distribution and allocation of timber benefits. The causes of these and other governance problems include an incomplete and ineffective regulatory framework, institutional weaknesses and a lack of accountability and respect for the rule of law.

In recent years DRC has taken two major steps towards clarifying and strengthening forest rights, roles and returns. First was the enactment of a new Forest Code calling for decentralised forest management and greater involvement of local communities. Second was a moratorium on, and legal review of, all



The Trans-Africa road in Ituri forest, Okapi Fauna Reserve, DRC. IUCN Photo Library © Jim Thorsell

concession contracts. The administration is also clamping down on illegal logging.

Although vital, these efforts have been undermined by poor execution, low awareness and irregularities such as the award of concessions in breach of the moratorium. Across DRC, any moves to improve forest governance continue to be hampered by the inadequate involvement of stakeholders in decision making, a lack of mechanisms for exchanging and disseminating information, and corruption and other illegal activities.

Strengthening voices for better choices

In response to these challenges, the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN) launched *Strengthening Voices for Better Choices* (SVBC). Financed mainly by

the European Union (EU), this global project is testing and promoting improved governance arrangements that will engender sustainable and equitable forest conservation and management.

In DRC, one of six project countries, SVBC is pursuing this goal in Bikoro territory, Equator province (see map overleaf). Bikoro is a sparsely populated and heavily forested region lying just below the equator in the north-west of the country. Three logging companies are active here, but its forests are also under growing pressure from illegal artisanal logging and charcoal production. Several social groups, including pygmies and women, are marginalised and there are few alternative livelihood options for those involved in illegal logging.

Since 2006, SVBC has focused on establishing multistakeholder platforms at different levels for civil society, business and government stakeholders to jointly address forest governance needs and issues.

At the community level, the project is supporting the formation and work of Committees for Dialogue and Vigilance (CDV). These village-based organisations have a remit to monitor forest exploitation, build relationships between logging companies and surrounding communities, and draw up and implement local development plans.

At the territorial level, SVBC is supporting Bikoro's Consultative Committee on Forest Governance, created to engage civil society, logging companies and local government in a constructive dialogue on forest governance problems and solutions.

At the provincial level, SVBC is working closely with Equator province's Network for Good Forest Governance (REBOGOF – Réseau pour la Bonne Gouvernance Forestière). Like Bikoro's consultative committee, the network aims to engage the key forest stakeholders in an open, informed discussion on good forest governance.

























SVBC is collaborating with a wide range of Congolese and international partners to realise its objectives. In Bikoro, the project's partners include the logging companies Ledy and SODEFOR (*Société de Développement Forestier*), local government agencies (including the police and security forces), the Church and local pygmy and Bantu communities. Nationally and internationally, its partners include the Federation of Timber Industries (FIB – *Fédération des Industriels des Bois*), the Coalition of Environmental NGO Networks (CRON – *Coalition des Réseaux des ONGs de l'Environnement*), the World Agroforestry Centre and Wageningen International.

SVBC's achievements

Forest governance assessment As in other project countries, SVBC began by commissioning a national assessment of the state of forest governance in DRC. Besides guiding the project's work, this will serve as a baseline for monitoring future governance



LEGEND

	SVBC pilot area		Closed evergreen lowland forest		Closed deciduous forest		Sparse grassland
	International boundary		Submontane forest (900–1500 m)		Deciduous woodland		Swamp bushland and grassland
	Provincial boundary		Montane forest (>1500 m)		Deciduous shrubland with sparse trees		Croplands (>50%)
	River		Swamp forest		Open deciduous shrubland		Waterbodies
	National capital		Mosaic of forest and croplands		Closed grassland		Waterbodies
	Provincial capital		Mosaic of forest and savannah		Open grassland with sparse shrubs		Settlements

Land cover map of DRC showing the local of Bikoro, SVBC's pilot area. Land cover is based on the Vegetation Map of Africa, prepared under the Global Land Cover 2000 Project (<http://www-gem.jrc.it/glc2000/>).

reforms. A second study on the impacts of logging by ITB (*Industries de Transformation des Bois*) in Bikoro has provided a basis for dialogue and negotiation with the customary forest owners.

Multistakeholder forest governance structures

SVBC has helped to establish three innovative multistakeholder structures to link local, provincial and national action on forest governance. A fourth structure, DRC's National Forest Governance Working Group, is currently being set up to focus on issues under the EU's Forest Law Enforcement, Governance and Trade (FLEGT) Action Plan.

At the community level, SVBC has supported the creation of 27 CDVs to represent the local population in its relations with

logging companies and local government. Members of the Committees, which represent one or more villages, include local customary chiefs, women, pygmies, priests, teachers and clan representatives.

Through the Committees, villagers who previously did not talk to each other – such as the pygmies and the Bantu people – have begun working together to improve their forests and communities. Villagers have also been able to meet with local officials and logging company representatives to learn about their rights under the new Forest Code. Once aware of these rights, they have voiced their opinions on securing fair contracts with the logging companies, and on using the proceeds of these for communal benefit.

IUCN is a serious and reliable organisation. Its ongoing activities (formation of local Committees for Dialogue and Vigilance, the information centre on forest exploitation, community radio dedicated to environmental concerns and sustainable development) help show people how they can take charge and contribute to sustainably managing the forest.

— José Endundo
Minister of Environment, DRC

The CDVs act as a “bridge” between villages and Bikoro’s Consultative Committee on Forest Governance. Created with SVBC’s support, this structure was formally approved by the governor of Equator province in 2007. All CDVs are members of the Consultative Committee. Under its charter, the Committee’s objectives include:

- ▶ engaging civil society, logging companies and government in a dialogue to analyse and resolve forest governance issues;
- ▶ raising awareness of DRC’s regulatory and fiscal framework for forests;
- ▶ mediating conflicts; and
- ▶ ensuring effective monitoring of forest concession management.

In May 2008, Equator province formally recognised REBOGOF, the third structure established under SVBC. The membership and objectives of this network are still being finalised but, like the Consultative Committee, it will provide a multistakeholder framework for addressing forest governance needs and linking actions at different administrative levels.

Building capacity and awareness By working with and through these multistakeholder platforms, SVBC has made substantial progress in building capacity and raising awareness of forest governance needs, principles and strategies in DRC.

In Bikoro, the project has organised two workshops on forest governance values for 50 people from 15 villages in the concession area of ITB. It has also held a workshop on participatory forest monitoring to strengthen community oversight of logging operations. In five villages, SVBC is now working with ITB to regenerate logged-over forest. At the same time, in partnership with the World Agroforestry Centre, SVBC is implementing a capacity-building programme for improved

farming and agroforestry to create alternative livelihoods for people involved in illegal logging.

The project’s awareness-raising activities have included the use of interactive drama and publication of statistics on timber production and trade. In partnership with the *Renaitre* newspaper, SVBC has been publishing cartoons on forest governance. The newspaper’s national reach gives the cartoons a potential audience of up to 1 million people. Lastly a mobile campaign on *cahiers de charge* (social responsibility clauses in concession contracts) with radio, video and other information sources in local languages is targeting 2,500 people in Bikoro currently negotiating with concessionaires.

Strengthening FLEG processes Local and nationally, SVBC has been playing a pivotal role in supporting and informing FLEG processes. The project’s support takes various forms. Information on global and regional forest governance initiatives (such as the Central African Forests Commission’s convergence plan) is being translated into local languages and disseminated. Three programmes on FLEG have been broadcast in partnership with DRC’s *Antenne A* television station, and a DVD on the EU’s FLEGT Action Plan is being prepared.

The project has organised several workshops for Congolese journalists, parliamentarians and senators on FLEG processes in general and the Africa FLEG process in particular. More than 50 journalists, 50 parliamentarians and 20 senators have participated in and benefited from these meetings. SVBC also supported the participation of a number of representatives from Equator province in the first Central Africa FLEGT Forum, held in July 2007 in Brazzaville, Congo.

Lastly the project is in the process of setting up an information centre on forest management and governance in Bikoro. This

I live in the margins of a life dictated by the Bantu people. I did not have equality in my village. I was not allowed to speak during public gatherings or contradict the chief of my village. Now, thanks to our village [dialogue and vigilance] committee, we have free and equal discussions with other key groups, including women, other tribes and the logging companies, on all issues concerning our human, social and developmental needs, as well as the needs of our forests.

—Enge, a pygmy from Mabonzi village, Bikoro

will provide a permanent source of information on FLEG, FLEGT and other initiatives for local stakeholders.

Future activities of SVBC

SVBC’s work in DRC will conclude in 2009. In the time remaining, the project will be taking steps to ensure the sustainability of its many achievements.

At the national level, a key priority will be to facilitate and strengthen DRC’s National Forest Governance Working Group, enabling it to sustain a national dialogue on the EU’s FLEGT Action Plan. This is the first stage in a process that may eventually see DRC negotiating a Voluntary Partnership Agreement (VPA) with the European Union to keep illegal timber exports out of Europe. In Ghana, another SVBC project country, IUCN has closely supported the successful negotiations for a VPA, gaining much valuable experience in the process.

Other priorities will be to continue disseminating information on forest governance. Two major mechanisms are being developed to this end: an information and communications strategy for Congolese civil society based on radio, publishing and other mass media; and an action plan for a coalition of media partners on forest governance.

SVBC will also continue to help stakeholders analyse forest governance problems



Equator province forest governance network meeting. Photo © IUCN



Members of Bikoro’s Consultative Committee on Forest Governance. Photo © IUCN

and solutions. On the issue of illegal logging, for example, the project is organising a national workshop to review the impacts and legality of artisanal timber production. It is also supporting a study of timber flows in north-east DRC (Beni territory).

At the same time, SVBC is continuing to strengthen the ability of the CDVs, Bikoro's Consultative Committee and Equator province's forest governance network to maintain an inclusive dialogue on forest governance issues. To that end, discussions were recently opened with SODEFOR on its joining Bikoro's Consultative Committee.

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Mbuti pygmy village in Ituri forest, Okapi Fauna Reserve, DRC. IUCN Photo Library © Jim Thorsell



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