

Emancipation of forest communities is important for forest conservation

by Meindert Brouwer

In DR Congo more than 40 million people living in the forest directly depend on the forest for their livelihood. If they would be empowered and enabled to develop a sustainable way of life without poverty, chances to keep the forest standing and to conserve biodiversity would increase.

Capacity building is not restricted to forest communities. It is also necessary in provincial and local forest administrations.

Unsustainable logging, unsustainable mining and unsustainable agriculture drive deforestation. The establishment of community forest concessions could reduce those pressures on the forest. In DR Congo a National Strategy on Community Forestry has been developed to do just this. NGO Tropenbos DRC is part of it. Tropenbos is supporting three forest communities to take control of their own lives and it will support more.

The emancipation is taking place in the region of Bafwasende in the province of Tshopo, a sparsely populated part of the rainforest in central-north DR Congo, measuring almost 200,000 square kilometres (almost 5 times Switzerland) and home to between 2.6 and 3 million people. An area where urban elites, military and militia get their way according to the law of being the strongest and through corruption.

DECREE However, since DRC's Minister of Environment signed a Ministerial Decree in 2016 to provide a legal basis for communities to manage their own forests, following the signature of the Community Forestry Decree by the



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Traditional ceremony called "Fimbo" in Lingala, literally meaning "whip", at the ceremony of reception of the legal titles of the community forest concessions by the communities in Baego.

Prime Minister in 2014, things can change for the better for the poor in the forest and for the forest itself. The political decision on a national level paved the way for forest communities to obtain permanent concession rights for 'multi-use' community forest concessions for up to a maximum of 50,000 hectares of land.

Roundtables on community forestry on a national and provincial level, with participation of government actors, civil society organisations, the private sector, local representatives, women's groups, indigenous leaders and traditional authorities, have created a National Strategy on Community Forestry, to strengthen collaboration among stakeholders on all levels – national, provincial and local – and design legal, technical and operational tools and procedures for the creation and participative, transparent and controlled development of community forest concessions.

Nevertheless, getting the three community forest concessions legalized in Tshopo province, proved to be a fight, since power abuse by some in formal and informal power at times delayed the process of demarcating the community's territory, assessing its natural resources and granting the required documents. However, justice prevailed and accompanied by NGO Tropenbos DRC, the three forest communities consisting of around 140 families in total, acquired the permanent titles of their own concessions in the forest in 2020, they totalled 90,000 hectares.

MANAGEMENT PLAN Now the communities have to learn how to make a living of their newly acquired forest concessions. In order to sustain their livelihoods, they elaborated a simple management plan. They will harvest non-timber forest products and develop agroforestry and cattle farming. Logging is not their focus. It is up to the community to decide what the focus will be, Tropenbos DRC's director Alphonse Maindo explains: 'One of the forest communities has decided to develop agroforestry in secondary forest and grow and sell cacao and food crops. They will keep chickens and goats and dig ponds to breed fish. They use rattan to



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Training of members of local communities on agroforestry in Bafwamogo, Bafwasende territory, Tshopo province.

make baskets and use the primary forest to collect non-timber forest products, in this case caterpillars and leaves for vegetables and medicine, also for the market. It comes down to a shift from slash and burn farming to sedentary farming, which means less pressure on the forest.'

If the other forest communities would decide to focus on small-scale commercial logging, the artisanal loggers which Tropenbos had previously assisted to become legal and independent, will in their turn teach the communities how to manage their forest sustainably.

It is an inspiring process. Already 65 community forest concessions have been established in several parts of DRC by 2020, covering around 1.2 million hectares in total, which is roughly 3 times the size of Switzerland.

In order to get them off the ground, access to credit is needed to pay for a range of costs: assessment of natural resources in the concession by a professional expert,

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payment for the application of land titles, development of a management plan, training in sustainable farming, agroforestry or sustainable small scale forestry (depending on the focus of activities), in some cases logging permits and in the end taxes on economic activities.

TRUE COMMITMENT Alphonse Maindo: 'Capacity building is not restricted to forest communities. It is also necessary in provincial and local forest administrations, so civil servants will be able to deal with the new frameworks and processes



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Training session at community forestry site in Bafwasende territory, Tshopo Province.



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Traditional extraction of palm oil.

put in place to establish community forest concessions and monitor their development. It is very important to have a true commitment by the provincial administration, which can make procedures simple and transparent. It is also very important to send technical experts to forest communities to prepare concessions free of charge.'

Funded by donors, NGOs like Tropenbos DRC take care of capacity building among the forest communities. Alphonse Maindo: 'We train forest communities in what they want to do and how to add value to their products. We support them in developing entrepreneurship, in drafting management plans and also in organizing themselves,

including how to deal with powerful outsiders who want to capture their natural resources. It is not only about sustainable economics, it is also about cultural, social and political change and empowerment.' Yes, there is a risk of donor-dependency, Alphonse Maindo admits. True commitment of all stakeholders and local ownership among the communities will make the difference.

It can be dangerous in Tshopo. There are raids on villages by militias. Things can get difficult because of demands by the military and elite in the background. To which extent do these circumstances pose a risk to forest communities who want to develop and protect their forest concessions? Alphonse Maindo: 'They may pose a risk for forest communities in terms of violence scaling or threats against

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community leaders and concession managers. Communities may still be kept away from part of their forest concessions despite having the formal legal title. It would probably increase the economic loss for forest communities whose forest concessions are not actually generating substantial income until now. The risk is more or less high, depending on the power of the elite and military involved in a conflict with communities and depending on the lobby and advocacy capacity of the forest communities and NGOs or CSOs supporting them.'

MBUTI In Tshopo, indigenous Mbuti people still live off the forest. Will Tropenbos DRC involve them, in one way or another, I ask Alphonse Maindo. He replies: 'Absolutely, we have to involve Mbuti people in the community forestry process as they are dependent on the forest and primary forest owners. Forest is not only a source for living to them, it is also life for them. We are planning to support two

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Mbuti communities to establish their own community forest concession. We are very happy that Bantou people have agreed to support these initiatives for Mbuti people. Now, the great challenge is to what extent Mbuti people will shift from nomadism to sedentary life, from harvesting forest products to farming. We are confident, as some Mbuti are already farming for Bantou and living in villages.'

Shouldn't the Mbuti be enabled to continue their traditional, nomadic way of life in the forest? Or is that not possible anymore? Alphonse Maindo: 'Granting the Mbuti forest concessions does not mean ending their traditional, nomadic way of life in the forest. It contributes to secure forests for them. Otherwise, the urban elite and the military as well as large companies are going to take all the forests. If there is no forest, there is no life for the Mbuti, who are

free to decide how they will live in their concession, how they will manage it, how they will value it. The trends we are observing is that the Mbuti are no longer staying in the forest, living a nomadic life. They are already shifting to sedentary life. They are living in villages with Bantous who employ them as farming workers almost for free, because they are paid in kind (alcohol, hemp, food, etc.). They remain poor. We think we should empower them to have their own farm instead of farming for others and being paid badly. The dream of the Mbuti surviving in forest is becoming distant. Therefore, we need to anticipate the change and prepare the Mbuti for a new life. That is transformative change.'

www.tropenbos.org

www.rainforestfoundationuk.org

TROPENBOS DRC

NGO Tropenbos DRC works towards sustainably managed landscapes where natural resources are sustainably exploited, local communities and indigenous people have improved livelihoods and the landscape is pacified in the provinces of Ituri, Mongala and Tshopo.

The three provinces consist of large areas of forests on which the local communities rely for their livelihoods. Although the natural resources are abundant, they face many threats from illegal mining, poaching, agricultural expansion, and deforestation. The levels of deforestation and degradation of forests are highly variable, depending on the areas and population density. Despite this context, securing the livelihoods of local communities represents an opportunity to protect the forests. Their protection for present and future generations will contribute to the fight against poverty, for food security and the preservation of water sources and biodiversity.

Work areas

Tropenbos DRC

- Together with local Civil Society Organisations (CSOs), supports the development and implementation of community forestry, through tools, guidelines and training of community members.
 - Together with CSOs lobbies for the revision of national nature conservation legislation regarding the exploitation of natural resources in protected areas.
 - Supports the regulation of both artisanal logging and mining by the provincial governments and private sector.
 - Supports artisanal loggers and miners to become formal Small and Medium Forest Enterprises (SMFEs).
 - Creates awareness on gender related topics, with special attention on the participation of women and other marginalized groups in decision-making processes, with local communities, CSOs and private and public partners.
- NGO Tropenbos DRC is a legal national entity of DR Congo and a member of the Tropenbos International Network.

Source: www.tropenbos.org