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.

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 450 families in total, acquired the permanent titles of their own concessions in the forest in 2020, they totalled 90,000 hectares.

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 for ‘multi-use’ community forest concessions for up to a maximum of 50,000 hectares of land.

Decision 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 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.

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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.

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 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.

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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.

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.

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Training of members of local communities on agroforestry in Bafwamogo, Bafwasende territory, Tshopo province.
It is not only about sustainable economics, it is also about cultural, social and political change and empowerment.

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 Bantu 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.

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We train forest communities in what they want to do and how to add value to their products.

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.

Mboti: 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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