

**DECLARATION
OF INTERNATIONAL NON-GOVERNMENTAL ORGANISATIONS WORKING FOR
THE SUSTAINABLE MANAGEMENT OF FOREST ECOSYSTEMS IN THE DRC,
RESPECTFUL OF THE RIGHTS AND INTERESTS OF LOCAL COMMUNITIES**

Forest Forum of the Democratic Republic of Congo, Kinshasa, 15th February 2006

Your Excellency the Vice-President,
Your Excellency the Minister of Planning,
Your Excellency the Minister for the Environment, Conservation and Nature, Water and Forests,
The Honourable Representative of French Cooperation,
Dear Colleagues,
Distinguished guests,

International NGOs working for the sustainable management of the DRC's forests would like to thank the Government of the DRC and French Cooperation for making this forum possible. This declaration aims to identify the challenges facing the DRC and its partners, along with the priority areas that we believe require immediate action.

The Government of the DRC is being offered a great opportunity to develop a forest management model that is both sustainable and at the same time enables the country's poorest and most marginalised communities to draw real benefit from it. As guardian of Africa's largest remaining area of tropical forest, the DRC is well-placed to be at the global forefront in implementing a sustainable forest management model that is based on the real participation of local communities.

To achieve this ideal, which we feel comes down to a simple issue of political will, the following priority actions need to be implemented:

1. Institutional evaluation of follow-up to the Priority Agenda

a. Strict respect for the moratorium

We welcome the adoption of a Presidential Decree in October 2005 reaffirming the validity of the moratorium on allocating any new forestry concessions. However, the repeated violations of this moratorium constitute a major setback to all ambitions to ensure the sustainable management of DRC's forests.

Strict application of the moratorium is a *sine qua non* condition for the sustainable management of DRC's forests. And yet even now, in the field, concessions granted in violation of the moratorium are fully operational. We fear that these operations, which violate, with impunity, Congolese law and the rights of local communities, may become established as a *fait accompli*. Such a situation must be avoided at all costs.

We therefore recommend ***the immediate and severe punishment of all logging companies that have violated the moratorium, including an immediate halt to their illegal operations.***

b. Need for participatory zoning

According to the terms of the Presidential Decree, a lifting of the moratorium is conditional upon two actions being fulfilled: "publication of the final results of the [logging contract] conversion process [...] and the adoption, on the basis of a consultative process, of geographic planning of future allocations for the next three years".

We recommend ***that a participatory zoning plan also be implemented as a sine qua non condition for the lifting of the moratorium, aimed at recognising the traditional rights of local communities, including indigenous peoples, on the basis of the principle of free, prior and informed consent.***

c. Active involvement of local communities

The crucial choices that now have to be made for the future of the Congolese forests and their inhabitants, call for the active involvement of the local people, who are the main 'stakeholders' and rightsholders.

All partners involved in formulating measures to implement the Forestry Code in the DRC must undertake to place local communities at the heart of the forest management decision-making process, for it is on these forests that their development, and that of future generations, depends.

We recommend that ***the different processes for formulating implementing measures for the Forestry Code should be undertaken in such a way as to enable the rights of local communities, including indigenous peoples, to be taken into account.***

d. Capacity building

We encourage the capacity building of State, academic and non-governmental institutions working for better management of the Congolese forests.

To this end, we recommend that ***a focus on communities and their active involvement in managing the forest, and a diversity of forest utilization models (not limited to or dominated by industrial logging) should underlie this capacity building and, indeed, the very work of these institutions.***

We also recommend that ***the operational capacities of these institutions be strengthened in order to ensure the impartiality, effectiveness and efficiency of their work on the ground.***

2. Forests and development

On the basis of our experience and programmes implemented in other countries, we believe that the seeds of sustainable development and the possibility of achieving the Millennium Development Goals lie not in the industrial logging of forests but in alternative forms of exploitation.

These alternatives must benefit local communities and preserve the integrity of forest ecosystems. They must focus on local communities as both their engine and primary beneficiaries. Mechanisms and institutions must be put in place to develop, finance and support implementation of these alternatives.

We therefore recommend that ***the Congolese State and its partners invest in researching and implementing alternatives to the industrial logging of forests.***

3. Rehabilitation of protected areas

We wish to encourage the government to develop the new Law on Nature Conservation on the basis of the principle of free, prior and informed consent of local communities, including indigenous peoples. The identification of new protected areas, like any other type of forest use, should be the result of a participatory zoning plan produced as described above.

In our opinion, ***any model for forest ecosystem management should include recognition of customary and traditional rights and the active involvement of local communities, and should avoid all expulsion of these populations from their ancestral lands.***

We would lastly like to reaffirm our commitment to work together, alongside local communities, with partners motivated to achieve the sustainable management of the DRC's forests, respectful of the rights and interests of local communities, including indigenous peoples.

Signatories:

Rebecca Adamson, President and Founder, First Peoples Worldwide - USA

Dr. Sandra Altherr, Pro-Wildlife - Germany

Sylvain Angerand, Forests Campaigner, Les Amis de la Terre - France

Lucy Baker, Bretton Woods Project - UK

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Javier Baltodano, Coecoceiba-Amigos de la Tierra - Costa Rica

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Stuart Wilson, Forests Monitor - UK