



Call for Urgent Action to Preserve the Cuvette Centrale Peatlands and Recognise the Customary Land Rights of Forest Communities

March 2022

The Congo Basin accounts for almost 10% of the world's biodiversity and the peatlands it contains are crucial in the global fight against climate change. In 2017, a team of British and Congolese scientists confirmed the presence of the world's largest peatland complex in Cuvette Centrale. Located between two countries, the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) and the Republic of Congo (Congo-B), the peatlands cover 145,500 km² and store almost 30 billion tonnes of carbon. This amount of carbon is equivalent to one year's worth of global fossil fuel emissions, making the Congo Basin a priority in the fight against global warming.

The peatlands are also the foundation to the cultural, economic and social life of local riparian communities. These forest communities have managed the peatlands for generations and it is thanks to their traditional land use practices that these ecosystems remain intact. They manage the peatland areas as sanctuaries or reservoirs for wildlife and fish species, which underpin their livelihoods.

The peatlands in the Congo Basin have thus far remained relatively unaffected by industrial pressures. This is due to the limited development of large-scale infrastructure, oil and gas exploitation, agriculture and limited logging due to the moratorium in the DRC. The lack of industrial activity has helped to protect these ecosystems and their carbon-rich peatlands.

However, it is estimated that 18% of the peatlands are occupied by timber concessions and 75% by oil blocks. If this area were to be fully exploited by oil, logging and mining companies for roads and other infrastructure, the peatlands would be destroyed and climate-damaging greenhouse gas emissions would be released. The Congo Basin peatlands

are therefore one of the world's largest potential carbon bombs.

Although the Cuvette Centrale peatlands have been protected from human pressures in the past, they now face several threats:

- Oil and gas exploitation;
- Industrial timber concessions;
- Expansion of industrial agriculture;
- The development of road, airport and port infrastructures;
- Urbanisation and disorganised expansion of towns without a coherent development plan;
- Drainage or diversion of watercourses to build roads and other infrastructure;
- The uncontrolled exploitation of charcoal "makala" to supply urban centres;
- The possible transfer of water from the Congo River basin in DRC to Lake Chad;
- Weak governance of peatlands, the absence of a coherent legal framework and an incomplete institutional framework;
- Poor recognition of the rights of local communities and indigenous peoples within the peatlands, and a weak understanding of their traditional knowledge;
- The potential expansion of militarised protected areas;
- Loss of peatlands due to natural disasters and climate change.

It is crucial Congo Basin governments reduce threats associated with the industrial exploitation of natural resources in the peatlands and prioritise strengthening the rights of local communities and indigenous peoples residing in Cuvette Centrale.

International funding commitments made at COP26 to conserve tropical forests in the Congo Basin and strengthen the land rights of indigenous peoples and local communities should be leveraged to achieve these ambitions.

We, members of the environmental civil society of the two Congos recommend the following:

To the governments of DRC and Congo-B

- Ensure the integrity of peatlands by not investing in industrial activities that are incompatible with their preservation (i.e. agroindustry, oil exploitation, timber exploitation);
- Adopt clear provisions on sustainable peatland governance in laws, programmes and policies;
- Support communities residing in the peatlands to obtain community forests;
- Strengthen independent monitoring using community-based monitoring tools in peatlands to prevent illegal exploitation of natural resources and enforce peatland protection laws;
- Improve information sharing with communities and strengthen their participation and involvement in all decision-making processes on peatland management;
- Sensitise local administrations on the importance of peatlands and provide them with peatland monitoring tools as well as operational and financial support;
- Strengthen mechanisms to protect the rights of indigenous people (baa'ka, batwa, cwa, bambuti, etc.) living in and around peatlands and guarantee their access to peatland areas;
- Respect commitments made at national, sub-regional (global peatland initiative/Brazzaville Declaration) and international level (Ramsar Convention, CAFI, COP26).

To Donor Governments

- Refrain from funding programmes and projects that do not guarantee respect for local laws, regulations, practices and customs (e.g. militarised conservation);
- Support processes or initiatives that support local communities and indigenous peoples to sustainably manage forests, in particular by mapping customary land use and securing their customary land rights through community forests;
- Put in place strong policies to ensure the integrity of peatland areas and monitor compliance with community-based monitoring tools;
- Make resources available to states and increase direct funding to local and national NGOs working closely with local communities to protect the peatlands;

To COMIFAC and ECCAS

- Develop specific guidelines for the management and protection of peatlands in the Congo Basin;
- In the next convergence plan, develop new and in-depth provisions on protecting and sustainably managing the peatlands;
- Encourage Congo Basin countries to prevent industrial oil and gas exploitation, agriculture, logging and mining investments and activities in peatlands;
- Encourage State Parties to establish and implement mechanisms for early warning, prevention and restoration of peatland areas.