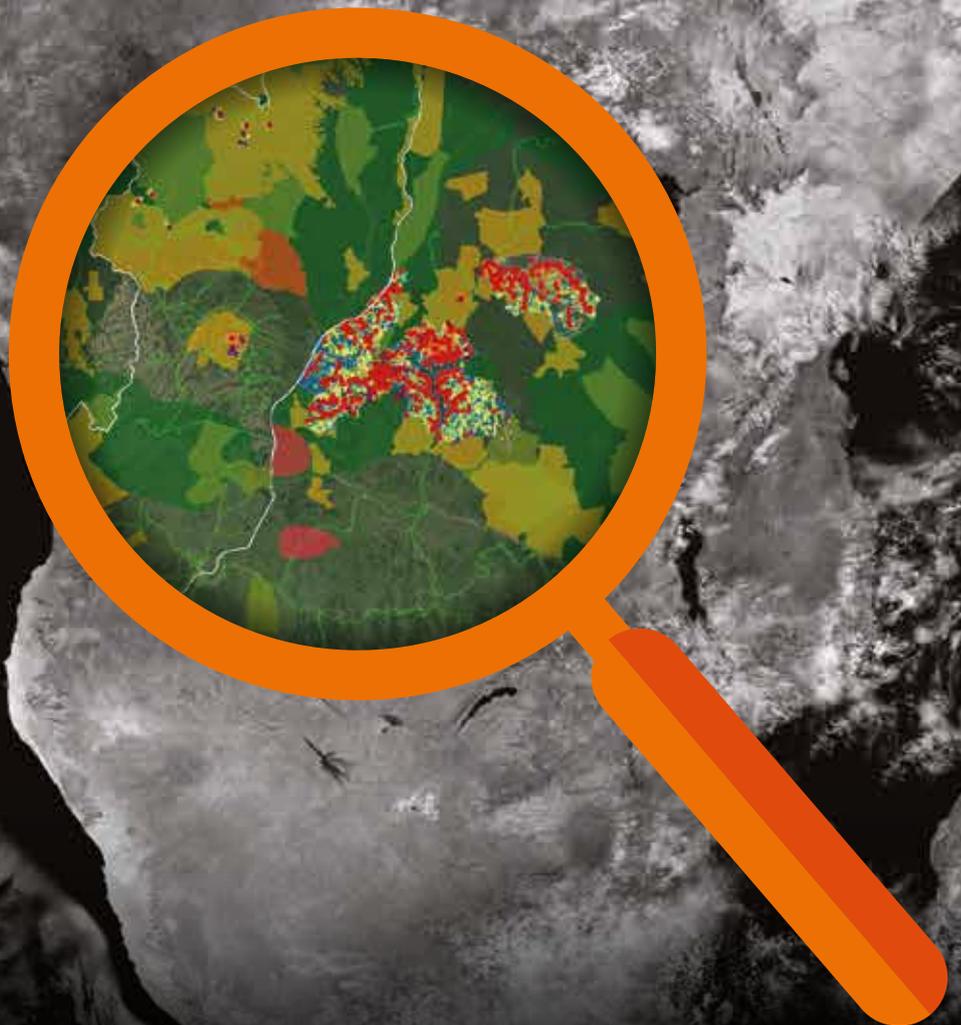


**SAFER GROUND:  
HOW PARTICIPATORY  
MAPPING CAN  
MITIGATE THE SOCIAL  
IMPACTS OF  
AGRI-BUSINESS IN  
THE CONGO BASIN**



# 1. SUMMARY

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The expansion of commercial agriculture in the Congo Basin, especially for palm oil, poses great risks to forests and the people who depend on them for their livelihoods and culture. While efforts to make palm oil more ‘sustainable’ focus on avoiding deforestation and biodiversity loss, far less attention has been paid to land rights and social impacts. International standards for agri-business, such as those created by the Roundtable on Sustainable Palm Oil (RSPO), seem to be ill-adapted to the African context. Community mapping in the Congo Basin shows how the social impacts of agri-business are already being felt, while providing an invaluable tool to tackle these threats head-on.

## 2. BACKGROUND: THE SOCIAL COST OF LARGE-SCALE AGRICULTURAL EXPANSION

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Congo Basin governments are welcoming large-scale agriculture projects with open arms, promoting them as a way to bring economic development and jobs to one of the world’s poorest regions. But for local and indigenous communities, the reality is often strikingly different — as large-scale agriculture projects dispossess them of their lands and livelihoods without bringing about the promised economic benefits.

Research by the Rainforest Foundation UK (RFUK) and other non-governmental organisations (NGOs) has shown that commercial agriculture projects, such as palm oil and rubber plantations, have been associated with the forceful displacement of communities from their ancestral lands, protracted land conflicts, loss of livelihoods with little or no compensation, disregard for their free, prior and informed consent (FPIC), as well as water and soil pollution.<sup>1</sup> These impacts are largely a consequence of Congo Basin governments’ disregard for customary land rights when allocating land to investors, compounded by a serious lack of reliable information on the people living in forest areas – including information on their customary tenure arrangements and patterns of forest use.

While relatively low population densities in rural areas and generally non-intensive uses of the forest can give the illusion that there is plenty of land available for agri-business expansion, participatory mapping has revealed that most forests are in fact occupied, managed and relied on by local and indigenous communities. Because much of the Congo Basin’s forests fall under “State domain”, those lands are at risk of being freely allocated to investors, often through opaque backdoor deals.



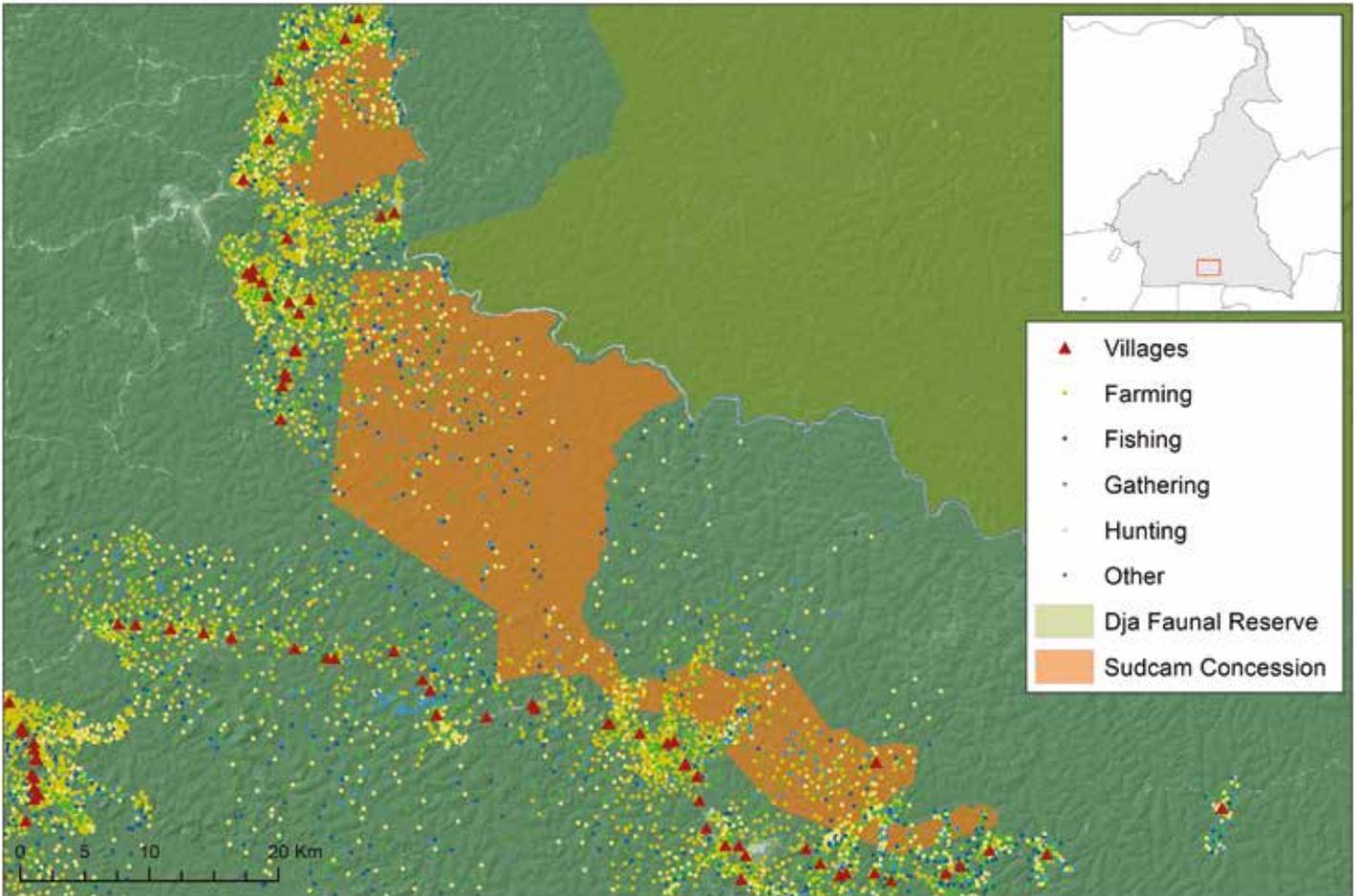
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<sup>1</sup> See RFUK (2018), *Palmed Off: An Investigation into Three Industrial Palm Oil and Rubber Projects in Cameroon and the Republic of Congo*, available at: <https://www.rainforestfoundationuk.org/media.ashx/palmoilreportenweb.pdf>; and RFUK (2013) *Seeds of Destruction. Expansion of industrial oil palm in the Congo Basin: potential*

*impacts on forests and people*, available at: <https://www.rainforestfoundationuk.org/media.ashx/seeds-of-destruction-2013-english.pdf>

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## MAP 1 - PARTICIPATORY MAPPING OF COMMUNITIES AFFECTED BY THE SUDCAM RUBBER PLANTATION IN CAMEROON



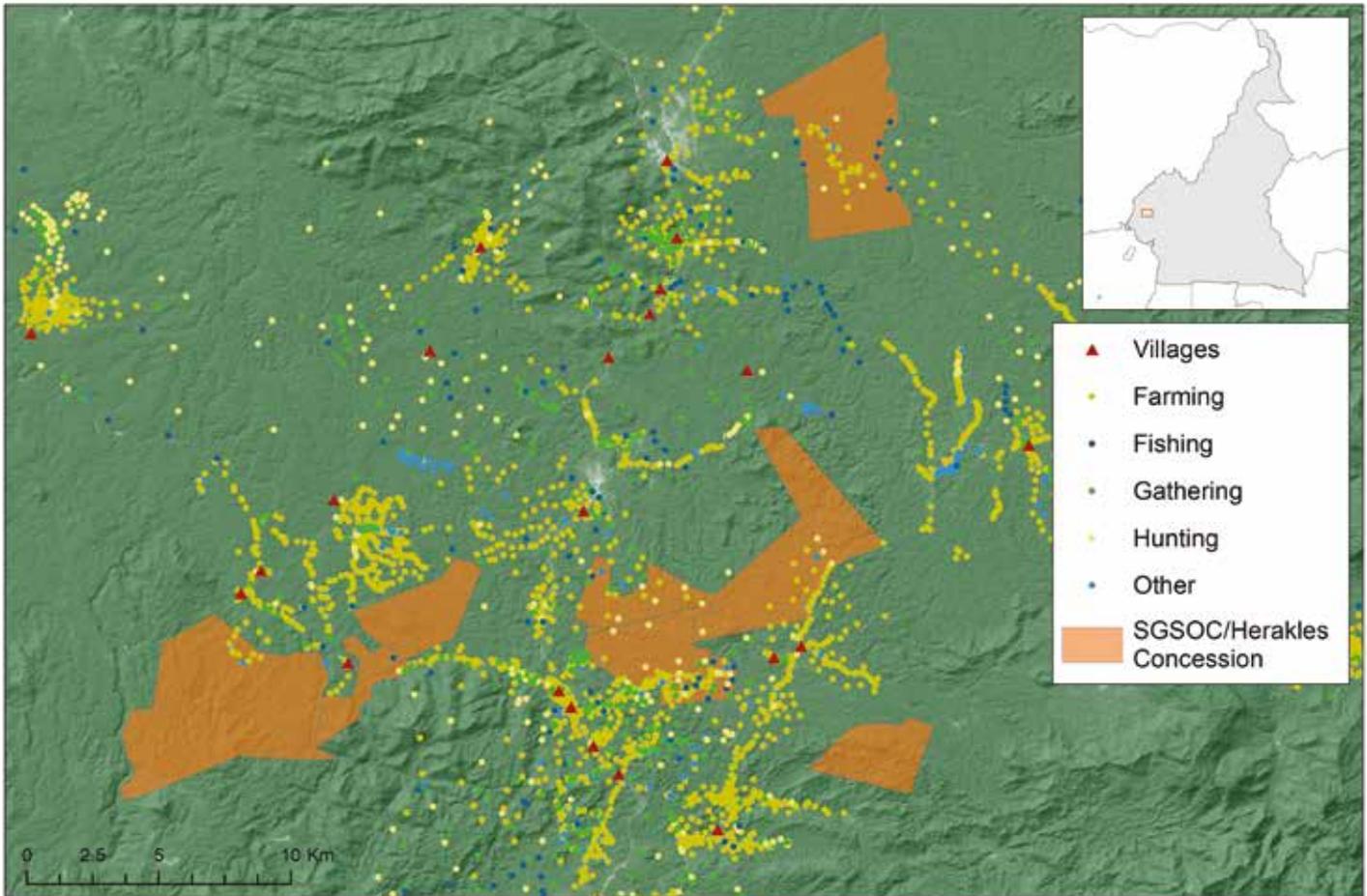
*The 30 or so communities that depend on the area allocated to Sudcam have seen their livelihoods squeezed between a rubber plantation and the neighbouring Dja Faunal Reserve. Source: MappingForRights.*

This was the case with the Sudcam rubber concession in Cameroon. Participatory mapping by 30 local and indigenous Baka communities around the concession, which was acquired by the Singapore-listed Halcyon Agri in 2016, has highlighted extensive livelihood activities across much of the area now undergoing conversion to industrial rubber plantations (see Map 1). This local presence had not been documented and thus was not taken into consideration in the decision to grant the land. As a result, local communities have decried losing their livelihoods without being adequately compensated. Three Baka camps were destroyed and their inhabitants forced to relocate.



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## MAP 2 - OVERLAP BETWEEN SGSOC/HERAKLES CONCESSIONS AND CUSTOMARY RESOURCE USE IN CAMEROON



*Participatory mapping shows that community land claims cover not only visible settlements and planting spaces but also less visible, much larger 'natural' spaces that are used for fishing, hunting and gathering. Source: MappingForRights.*

International agencies, NGOs, national governments and major companies are all under scrutiny to make commercial agriculture more 'sustainable'. But while efforts focus on avoiding deforestation and biodiversity loss, the need to manage human rights impacts and avert land-related conflicts is often overlooked.

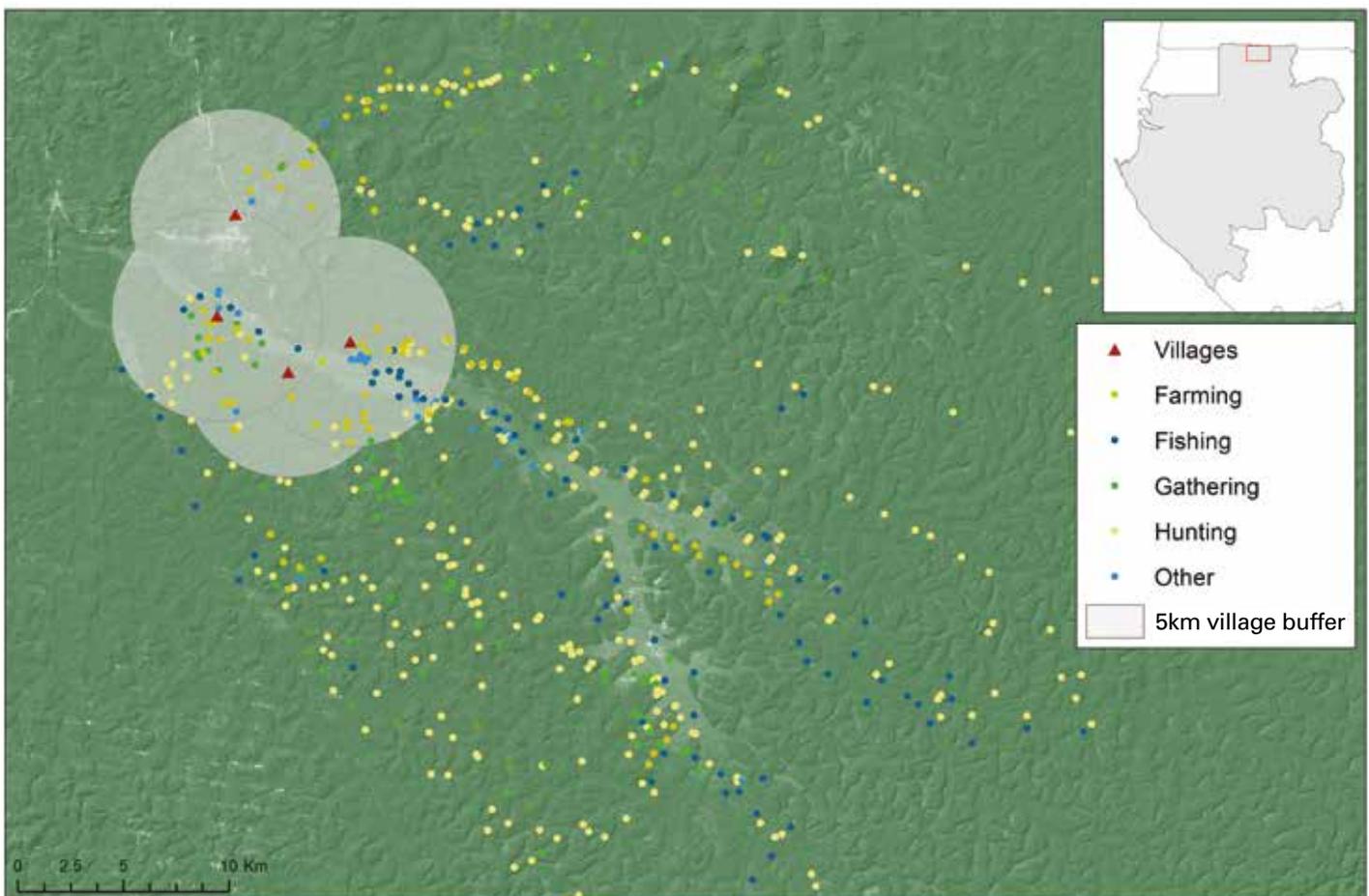
In the palm oil sector, in particular, the main focus of the sustainability agenda is on shifting new development away from primary forests and onto 'degraded land'. While the concept is sound and

can help reduce deforestation and biodiversity loss significantly, there are a number of challenges with this approach. First, the definition of 'degraded land' is problematic and often encompasses areas that have been selectively logged but still retain important biodiversity values, carbon stocks and livelihood or watershed functions. Second, it fails to account for the fact that community land claims extend across both the rural complex as well as intact forest areas – thus possibly causing or exacerbating land-related conflict in these areas (see Map 2, for example).

Numerous initiatives to map land suitable for 'sustainable' palm oil have not sufficiently represented this complex use of forests that is crucial to avoiding conflict. For example, a palm oil suitability mapping exercise conducted by the French Agricultural Research Centre for International Development (CIRAD) and the World Wide Fund for Nature (WWF)

merely placed a five kilometre buffer area around known villages and roads to mark these areas as socially unsuitable for large scale sustainable palm oil.<sup>2</sup> As illustrated in Map 3, such an arbitrarily defined perimeter may not capture the full extent of livelihood activities, especially those of semi-nomadic hunter-gatherers.

### MAP 3 - COMPARING THE WWF AND CIRAD 5 KM 'SOCIAL BUFFER' AREA WITH ACTUAL FOREST USE MAPPED BY FOUR BAKA AND BANTU COMMUNITIES IN NORTHERN GABON



*Applying the arbitrary WWF/CIRAD five km buffer around populated places would fail to encompass all actual forest dependencies of local people, and is inadequate as a basis for determining the social suitability of palm oil plantations in many parts of the Congo Basin, as shown here in Northern Gabon. Source: MappingForRights.*

<sup>2</sup> Feintrenie L, Gazul L, Goulaouic R and Miaro L (2016) 'Spatialized production models for sustainable palm oil in Central Africa: Choices and potentials', Scaling up Responsible Land Governance, Annual World Bank Conference on Land and Poverty, The World Bank: Washington DC, available at: [https://agritrop.cirad.fr/580127/1/Feintrenie\\_2016\\_Spatialized%20potential%20for%20oil%20palm%20in%20Central%20Africa.pdf](https://agritrop.cirad.fr/580127/1/Feintrenie_2016_Spatialized%20potential%20for%20oil%20palm%20in%20Central%20Africa.pdf)

### 3. HOW COMMUNITY MAPS CAN FOSTER MORE SUSTAINABLE PRACTICES

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Efforts to make commercial agriculture more sustainable will only succeed if land rights and social aspects are fully taken into account. Detailed and accurate data on local tenure systems and resource use patterns is critical to avoid the risk of land conflict, manage social and human rights impacts, and ensure that commercial agriculture provides genuine opportunities for local communities.

Using low-cost, easy-to-use technologies, RFUK's [MappingForRights](#) initiative supports communities to map their lands and record geographical features they themselves define as important, such as clan tenure boundaries, fishing areas and sacred sites. Both the process (participatory mapping) and the outputs (community maps) can help ensure more responsible commercial agriculture practices. Participatory mapping, using an appropriate methodology, can and should be used by States and companies before identifying sites for proposed projects, to rule out areas where there is a high risk of land and resource-related conflict with communities. In those areas that are selected as potential development sites, the maps can be used to ensure proper FPIC processes for *all* communities potentially affected, including marginalised groups.

Such maps can also be used to inform internal zoning of plantations, to preserve communities' resource access and use rights or as a basis for

channelling benefits to them. They can also help to understand the full extent of what communities are losing when their forest lands are given away to large-scale agriculture.<sup>3</sup> In the event of a land-related conflict, community mapping can help clarify claims and assist in dispute-settlement. The maps can also serve as a geographical basis for the identification and management of smallholder production schemes, where appropriate.

Supplementary data collected during the mapping process on health and education access can also provide invaluable information on local infrastructure and development needs, helping investors to develop adequate local development plans, to make well-suited social responsibility commitments and to objectively monitor the supposed developmental benefits of the project.



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<sup>3</sup> The legal provisions regarding compensation in Congo Basin countries generally only entitle communities to compensation for loss of transformed land (planting and living spaces), failing to consider the crucial livelihood and cultural value of untransformed forest land.

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## 4. RECOMMENDATIONS

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As international agribusiness investors set their sights on the Congo Basin, much remains to be done to ensure that projects do not harm the environment, human rights or local livelihoods, and that they do bring about genuine benefits to the rural poor.

### **Congo Basin governments** should:

- Tie decisions on commercial agriculture to participatory land-use planning processes that incorporate customary land tenure and communities' own development plans.
- Ensure that the full extent of customary claims and resource use patterns are documented *prior* to any decision on land allocation.
- Legislate strict standards to ensure that FPIC from communities is obtained before any development. Communities should be made fully aware of the consequences of the conversion of these lands for commercial agriculture, and that any expressed collective demand to exclude these lands from future development is to be respected.
- Use participatory maps to resolve existing land disputes, including through the restitution of land where necessary, and agree adequate compensation packages.

### **Agro-industrial companies** should:

- Conduct rigorous due diligence and assessment of land considered for possible development/ expansion, not only in terms of its biodiversity value but also to ensure that the full extent of customary rights and usage regimes are clearly identified and mapped. Ensure this is done through a participatory process involving all sections of local and indigenous communities.
- In cases where governments have not properly document local customary rights and resource use, documented or support independent assessments and mapping exercises as part of environmental and social impact assessments.
- Not start any development on community lands where local and indigenous communities have not given their FPIC. Ensure that they have been informed of potential impacts of the proposed project and that FPIC has been recorded.



# SUPPORTED BY:

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