

FGMC Case Study - May 2020

**ForestLink: unlocking the potential of forest guardians and environmental defenders
in tackling illegal logging in the Democratic Republic of Congo**

With support from the UK Department for International Development (DfID), the Rainforest Foundation UK (RFUK) has been successfully developing and testing a ground-breaking new end-to-end system that is unlocking the potential of traditional forest guardians in monitoring and protecting their forests. ForestLink enables communities anywhere in the world to capture and transmit highly accurate reports of forest illegalities to authorities and other stakeholders in real-time – even in areas with no mobile or internet connectivity. Using a customisable app, trained community observers send low-cost alerts using specially compressed data on a range of different issues to a database via SMS, internet or a special satellite connection. Local NGOs and/or government agencies then analyse this information on bespoke databases to detect illegal hotspots or trends, and to trigger targeted verification and law enforcement missions.



The programme's aims are to:

- Improve law enforcement for a sustainable reduction of illegalities and better protection of community rights;
- Incorporate civil society supported real-time monitoring systems within forest control mechanisms;
- Sustain the participation of forest communities and civil society in forest monitoring and management.

Since it was launched in 2015, [the award-winning system](#) has been successfully deployed in Cameroon, the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), Ghana, the Republic of Congo (RoC) and Peru. In Africa, the initiative is currently working with 120 communities with over 200 active community observers monitoring illegal logging across nearly 40 concessions. Between April 2019 and March 2020, approximately 1,400 illegal logging alerts have been sent on issues ranging from logging companies' non-compliance with social responsibility agreements and logging standards, violations of employee labour rights, destruction of sacred sites, asset-grabbing by local authorities and embezzlement of community development funds. The data provided by local communities has triggered dozens of forest control missions by local authorities and joint verification missions with CSOs.

Combined with local capacity building initiatives including the training of more than 180 community advocacy leaders, this has led to a number of successful community claims



against logging companies for unpaid royalties and the fulfilment of social development projects such as the construction of health centres and schools.

“Forestlink is a tool that can contribute to improving forest governance in the DRC if the forest administration integrates its use into forest control processes” - André Safari, Focal Point of the REDD Climate Working Group of Tshopo Province.

DRC case study – catalysing grassroots legal capacity in Equateur province

Illegal logging in DRC is rampant with around 90 percent of timber believed to be illegal and with the country’s national moratorium on new logging concessions repeatedly being breached in recent years. Conventional independent forest monitoring by national or international NGOs doesn’t always get to the root of the problem due to the high costs and logistical barriers of organising field missions from capital cities as well as inefficiencies in the reporting and disclosure cycle.

ForestLink is tackling this by empowering communities on the frontline of illegal deforestation. It equips them with the tools to alert civil society and authorities of illegal activities occurring in their forests in real-time. In Equateur province, this effort is coordinated by the local NGO GASHE¹ in collaboration with the Equateur province civil-society group (SOCIPEQ²) and the national network of independent observers (RENOI-RDC³) led by the mandated Independent Monitor, OGF⁴. During an FGMC supported workshop in August 2018, the *Groupe de Travail Plaidoyer* (GTP), or “Advocacy working group”, was set up to provide further legal support to local communities.

“The ForestLink RTM initiative has strengthened our monitoring work. As the mandated independent monitor, ForestLink will enable us to access data that can orientate our control missions.” - Florent Nkay, Program Director of the NGO OCEAN⁵ during the ForestLink training.

When local communities alerted them to industrial-scale illegal logging by a major logging company in DRC, the GTP supported them to compile a legal case which led to the arrest of a company official in March 2019 – believed to be the first of its kind against a logging company in the DRC since the Forest Code was passed in 2002⁶.

¹ GASHE (Groupe d’Action pour sauver l’Homme et son environnement), RFUK’s local partner, is located in Mbandaka, Equateur Province, DRC. The charity aims to protect the environment and its resources whilst encouraging human development of those who live there, such as forest and indigenous communities. We have worked with GASHE since 2012 on issues such as community forestry, real-time forest monitoring and sustainable conservation.

² The mission of SOCIPEQ (Société Civile de la Province de l’Équateur) is to represent the population in fighting for the improvement of governance in the DRC for a harmonious and inclusive development.

³ The RENOI-RDC is a national-level Independent Forest Monitoring (IFM) coalition led by mandated IM-FLEG (OGF) working to contribute to national and international multi-stakeholder deliberative processes to advance forest governance reforms.

⁴ OGF (Observatoire de la Gouvernance Forestiere) is a national mandated Independent Monitoring (IM) organization, working to monitor and sustainably manage forest exploitation activities in the DRC’s rainforests and more specifically, monitor the implementation of Forest Law and Governance (FLEG) through civil society led monitoring.

⁵ OCEAN (Organisation Congolaise des Ecologistes et Amis de la Nature) is a provincial mandated Independent Monitoring (IM) organization, working to monitor and sustainably manage forest exploitation activities and monitoring the implementation of Forest Law and Governance (FLEG) in Tshopo and Mongala provinces.

⁶ <https://www.rainforestfoundationuk.org/global-donors-called-to-address-forest-governance-breakdown-in-dr-congo-as-chinese-company-accused-of-widespread-illegal-logging>

When the case was dismissed following a reported intervention of a high-level official in Kinshasa, GTP worked with SOCIPEQ to appeal the judgement⁷ and to join forces with national and international NGOs to raise the alarm about governance of the forest sector. This combined effort has prompted the Congolese government and its international reform partners to commit to a legal review of the concessions held by the company and indeed across the entire country.

Joseph Bolongo, GASHE's RTM DRC coordinator declared: *"Time has come for national authorities to put an end to this anarch[ic logging] which has been documented and condemned by civil society for a long time now."*

This experience has emboldened other communities in the province to take a stand against illegal logging and to file other legal complaints with the support of GTP. For example, a total of 7 complaints have been filed against the same company operating in Équateur province. Two trials are currently ongoing at the Mbandaka Appeal Court: two cases against the company; most of the other files are under public prosecution investigation (by the *Parquet de Grande instance*), including one against a senior local official suspected of corruption who has been removed from his official duties while the file is under investigation. Advocacy by communities in Bolomba territory of Equateur province, with support of the GTP, resulted in the seizure of more than 2,000 logs with an estimated market value of 5,000,000 USD and the suspension of industrial logging activities.

A new approach to forest protection

By equipping communities with simple, low-cost tools to transmit alerts of illegal logging and other forest crime on their lands in real-time, ForestLink can spark powerful civil society action and lead to enhanced and more targeted law enforcement efforts. Crucially, it can also foster greater transparency. By making the data available to different stakeholders, it can show patterns of non-enforcement – for example where lack of verification or enforcement from officials may be evidence of collusion with illegal loggers.



⁷ <https://www.rainforestfoundationuk.org/drc-government-suspends-logging-company-after-civil-society-reports-illegal-rainforest-logging>