

**WHITE
PAPER**

A JUST TRANSITION IN THE DRC

*Environmental Justice, Territorial Sovereignty
and Indigenous Peoples*

September 2026

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ABOUT CORAP, NOTRE TERRE SANS PÉTROLE, RAINFOREST FOUNDATION UK AND CONTRIBUTING ORGANISATIONS

CORAP

Established in 2013, the Coalition of Civil Society Organisations for Monitoring Reforms and Public Action (CORAP) is a Congolese platform bringing together more than 50 civil society organisations engaged in monitoring reforms, public policies and government action in the Democratic Republic of the Congo. CORAP works to strengthen citizen participation, governance and accountability, while promoting greater consideration of social, economic and environmental priorities in public policy. Its main areas of work include human rights, natural resource governance, environment and climate, ecological and energy transition, access to energy, forest and water protection, and community development. CORAP has developed particular expertise in monitoring the electricity sector, major energy and infrastructure projects, as well as national debates on hydrocarbons and a just energy transition in the DRC. www.coraprdc.org

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NOTRE TERRE SANS PÉTROLE (NTSP)

Notre Terre Sans Pétrole (NTSP) is a Congolese citizen-led campaign bringing together more than 200 civil society organisations, citizen movements, community-based and youth organisations, representatives of Indigenous Peoples, researchers and human rights defenders, supported by alliances at national, African and international levels. Created in response to the expansion of oil and gas projects in the DRC, the campaign works to protect communities, their rights and territories, as well as the forests, peatlands, water resources and biodiversity of the Congo Basin.

NTSP advocates for a just transition grounded in meaningful community participation. Its work combines citizen mobilisation, research, advocacy, communication, financial flow monitoring and the promotion of alternatives adapted to local realities. www.notreterresanspetrole.org

www.notreterresanspetrole.org

RAINFOREST FOUNDATION UK (RFUK)

Rainforest Foundation UK (RFUK) is an international organisation established in 1989 that works to protect tropical forests and advance the rights of Indigenous Peoples and local communities. Its approach focuses on securing land rights, strengthening community forest governance, supporting community-based monitoring, improving access to justice, and ensuring that communities can effectively participate in decisions concerning their lands and natural resources.

In the DRC, RFUK works with Congolese organisations and local communities on forest governance, land rights, community forests, and the impacts of extractive activities and certain climate policies.

<http://www.rainforestfoundationuk.org>

THE WHITE PAPER ON A JUST TRANSITION IN THE DRC

The White Paper, “A Just Transition in the DRC”, is led by the Notre Terre Sans Pétrole campaign, with contributions from CORAP and Rainforest Foundation UK.

It seeks to inform the national debate on the DRC’s development choices and contribute to the emergence of a vision for a just transition that reflects the country’s realities. The report places the rights, needs, knowledge and meaningful participation of communities and Indigenous Peoples at the heart of this discussion. It also highlights key issues related to social and environmental justice, territorial sovereignty, natural resource governance and sustainable development. Drawing on an analysis of several contexts and territories across the DRC, the White Paper sets out key directions and recommendations intended to strengthen dialogue among communities, civil society, public authorities, technical and financial partners, and other stakeholders.

It is designed as a reference tool for advancing a national dialogue on the conditions required for a just, inclusive, sovereign and sustainable transition in the Democratic Republic of the Congo.

Aymar N. Bisoka

Lore Bertrem

Maurice Ntububa

Executive Summary

This White paper is rooted in a fundamental paradox: the Democratic Republic of Congo is today portrayed as a “solution country” for the planet because of the extraordinary scale of its forests, its water resources, and its minerals; all of which are essential to the global energy transition. Yet its territories remains highly fragile, confronted with accelerating deforestation, pollution, food and energy insecurity, dependence on extractive industries, and persistent wide-ranging social. At the center of global ecological dynamics, the DRC remains deeply vulnerable on both environmental and social fronts. Its political ecology is characterised by major contradictions: externally oriented sustainability discourse contrasts with local realities marked by precarious livelihoods and environmental degradation; exceptional ecological wealth coexists with an extractive-dependent economy; and commitments to equity continue to coexist with the persistent exclusion of the affected populations.

These contradictions are experienced on a daily basis across the country’s territories. They are evident in the struggles of Indigenous peoples and local communities, whose lands; forests, and fishing areas are increasingly under threat by oil, mining, and logging projects, the loss of vital habitats caused by mega-dams; pollution resulting from extraction; the appropriation of forests in the name of carbon; and growing poverty around strictly protected areas. Presented as drivers of development or the green transition, the benefits of these projects for local communities remain limited. Poor resource governance accelerates environmental degradation and exacerbates health risks. The disconnect between international commitments and the reality experienced by communities highlights an urgent need to rethink the ecological transition from a perspective of environmental justice centered on the real needs of Congolese people.

From this perspective, this White paper pursues the following three complementary objectives :



To examine the limitations of Congolese political ecology, with a view to proposing a reorientation based on the territorialization of environmental policies and a substantive definition of a just transition.



To amplify the demands of Indigenous peoples, local communities, and civil society organizations in response to destructive projects, whether fossil-fuel-based or presented as “green.”



To formulate recommendations for a just transition agenda in the DRC, rooted in the realities of local populations.

The findings of our research are clear : the current trajectory, largely driven by external priorities, can be neither just nor sustainable. A truly just transition must be based on four inseparable requirements:



It must guarantee people's effective access to the ecosystem services on which their livelihoods depend: water, land, forests, and biodiversity.



It must ensure their full and meaningful participation in decisions concerning their territories, from policy design through implementation and monitoring.



It must recognize their perspectives, interests, and organizations as legitimate actors in environmental governance.



Finally, it must incorporate local knowledge and ontologies that regard nature as a living being with rights, rather than merely a resource to be exploited.

These requirements entail recognizing communities' capacity to decide the future of their territories, in all the complexity of their internal dynamics. They refer to the three fundamental dimensions that constitute environmental justice: distribution, participation, and recognition. Without this refocusing, Congolese political ecology will continue to reproduce colonial and neocolonial dynamics, weaken living territories, and undermine the credibility of climate commitments. With it, on the contrary, the DRC can become a true driver of justice and sustainability, rooted in its social and ecological realities.

Three key messages emerge from this analysis :



First, environmental justice in the DRC cannot be limited to the redistribution of benefits and formal participation. It must fully recognize local knowledge, which shapes subsistence practices, environmental protection, and an in-depth understanding of the territories. Communities know their rivers, their soils, their forests, and their seasons. They have their own ways of conceiving the relationship between humans and nature. Without this recognition, the transition reproduces historical injustices inherited from colonization and perpetuated by contemporary policies that continue to discredit local ways of thinking about and governing nature.



Second, the transition must be tailored to local contexts. Universal solutions fail when they ignore social, cultural, and ecological contexts. Even projects presented as "green" can have negative effects: forced displacement, loss of livelihoods, and increased local tensions. The local level is not a retreat; it is the scale at which real compromises are forged, conflicts are played out, and the everyday practices of protecting the living world are carried out. Territorializing the transition means starting from the concrete realities of local areas, recognizing their history, their customs, and their vulnerabilities.



Third, a just transition is fundamentally political. It results neither from technical adjustments nor from abstract consensus, but from mobilizations, struggles, and power dynamics. Rights have effect only if they are backed by collective action. In the DRC, communities are already organizing to defend their lands, forests, and rivers. These struggles remind us that the transition cannot be separated from structural inequalities and colonial legacies. Granting rights is necessary but insufficient: without political empowerment, the law can be instrumentalized and stripped of its substance.

Based on these observations, four pillars for transformation are therefore proposed :



The first is to redefine Congolese political ecology from the ground up. The label “solution country” must be rooted in local realities. Environmental policies must be based on the needs, interests, and knowledge of the people. A “bottom-up” approach must become the norm.



The second pillar aims to bring together existing initiatives for a just transition. Political ecology is a space for struggle. We must strengthen the movements that amplify these voices by grounding them in the realities of Indigenous peoples and local communities, in order to transform demands into concrete political actions.



The third pillar proposes creating a clear inventory of local demands. This involves identifying, documenting, and disseminating the communities’ demands in order to present them coherently to Congolese authorities and international partners.



The fourth pillar calls for strengthening advocacy on challenges that have already been identified: destruction of territories, pollution, health impacts, and forced displacement. These problems are well known; the task now is to address them through concrete, binding, and verifiable reforms.

Ultimately, making the DRC a true “solution country” does not mean offering its forests, rivers, and minerals to the world without anything in return. It means building, together with Indigenous peoples and local communities, a political ecology capable of ensuring equitable access to ecosystem services, the local redistribution of benefits, genuine participation in decision-making, and full recognition of local knowledge and ontologies.

Environmental justice is not merely a nice-to-have; it is the very condition for any sustainability.

Without it, the transition will remain an empty phrase, bringing new forms of violence. With it, the transition can become a path toward collective emancipation, restored dignity, and the rebuilding of relationships between human societies, territories, and the living world.



02 Introduction

The DRC is endowed with an exceptional ecological wealth of global significance. It is home to a large portion of the Congo Basin's forests. It has significant freshwater reserves, and possesses minerals essential to energy transition technologies. These assets place the country at the center of international climate debates and explain why the DRC is increasingly portrayed as a key player in the response to environmental crises. But this image masks a more complex reality. On the ground, Congolese ecosystems are being weakened by deforestation, pollution linked to extractive activities, soil degradation, and the growing pressure of climate change. These dynamics have direct consequences on daily life: declining agricultural production, food insecurity, health problems, and a scarcity of drinking water. Rural, forest-dependent and riverine communities bear a particularly heavy burden of these impacts.

Yet it is against this backdrop that the “solution country” concept has gained traction in the DRC. The premise underlying this designation is that the country's natural resources could enable it to play a pivotal role in the global efforts to address climate change. But this vision raises a crucial question: under what conditions can this promise also and above all benefit Congolese men and women? Indeed, all too often, environmental policies and so-called “green” projects in the DRC are designed to meet external expectations, without taking into account the needs, customs, and rights of the communities living in the affected areas. In many cases, these projects restrict access to land, forests, or fishing areas; displace populations; pollute their territories; or undermine their livelihoods. Presented as technical or financial solutions, certain initiatives actually exacerbate inequalities and fuel local tensions. Evidence shows that an ecological transition that fails to account for these impacts can neither advance social justice or ensure environmental sustainability.

This White paper therefore advocates a different approach, grounded in the principles of environmental justice. A just transition in the DRC first and foremost means that communities must be able to truly benefit from the services provided by the ecosystems on which they depend (redistribution). It also requires effective participation in decision-making, from policy design through implementation and monitoring (participation). It

also requires recognition of local organizations, collective interests, and knowledge derived from on-the-ground experience (recognition). Finally, it relies on transparent governance that is accountable and capable of preventing abuses (governance). Without this change of course, the “solution country” designation risks perpetuating historical imbalances and long-standing power dynamics in a new form. Conversely, by building on local realities and placing the relevant stakeholders at the center of decision-making, Congolese political ecology can become a powerful lever for improving living conditions, sustainably protecting ecosystems, and strengthening the credibility of the country’s climate commitments.

Based on these challenges, this White paper aims to clarify the meaning of “solution country” and lay the groundwork for a truly just ecological transition in the DRC.



02.1 A “solution country” for whom?

« As the owner and guardian of the environmental potential sought by the world to address the climate change challenges, the Democratic Republic of the Congo presents its forests, mangroves, peatlands, freshwater resources, and strategic minerals as a ‘Natural Response’ to climate issues. The DRC is ‘the solution country’ to the climate crisis. »

(Her Excellency Mrs. Ève Bazaiba Masudi, former Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Environment and Sustainable Development)

In the context of the global climate crisis, countries with abundant natural resources play a vital role in combating global warming and adapting to ongoing changes. The DRC, located at the heart of the Congo Basin, possesses major assets that place it at the center of these challenges. The country is rich in biodiversity and home to vast tropical forests capable of absorbing large amounts of carbon. It also has significant hydroelectric potential, as well as mineral resources essential to the global energy transition, such as cobalt, lithium, and copper. These resources make the DRC a key player in discussions about the planet’s energy future. It is in this context that the country is increasingly positioning itself as a “solution-oriented nation,” highlighting its role in environmental protection and the development of technologies described as “green”.

In fact, the DRC is home to approximately 145 million hectares of forest, representing nearly 60% of the Congo Basin, the second-largest tropical forest region in the world after the Amazon . These forests play a fundamental role in regulating the climate by storing considerable amounts of carbon. The country's peatlands and mangroves further enhance this capacity to capture and store atmospheric carbon, thereby limiting global warming. Beyond climate, these ecosystems provide essential services to local populations: they regulate water, protect biodiversity, and support food security for the local communities that depend directly on them . At the same time, the DRC plays a central role in the global energy transition thanks to its mineral resources. Cobalt, lithium, coltan, and germanium mined within its borders are indispensable for the manufacture of phones, computers, batteries, and digital technologies. The DRC is currently the world's leading producer of cobalt, accounting for approximately 70% of global production, a key metal for electric vehicle batteries and energy storage . In 2023, it produced approximately 140,000 metric tons of cobalt , far surpassing other producing countries . The country also possesses significant reserves of copper, nickel, manganese, and lithium, which are necessary for the development of renewable energy.

The DRC also has vast freshwater reserves capable of meeting food, energy, and industrial needs across the African continent and beyond. Its hydroelectric potential is among the highest in the world, estimated at over 100,000 MW, approximately 13% of global potential . However, only a small portion of this capacity is currently being utilized . Projects such as the Inga hydropower complex are presented as pillars of green growth, greenhouse gas emission reduction, and regional development . The “solution country” designation thus rests on the DRC's strategic role in climate regulation, biodiversity protection, and the supply of key resources for the energy transition. However, this designation remains vague regarding its actual benefits for the Congolese people and the affected territories. Indeed, while the DRC is presented as a solution for the planet, it remains highly vulnerable both ecologically and socially. First of all, from an environmental standpoint, although the country is among the lowest emitters of greenhouse gases, it is experiencing rapid degradation of its ecosystems. In 2024, the DRC lost nearly 590,000 hectares of primary tropical forests , placing it among the countries most affected by deforestation . This loss undermines climate regulation, depletes soil fertility, and reduces the ability of ecosystems to sustain human life. Pollution of rivers, groundwater, soil, and air particularly in mining areas and major cities exacerbates this vulnerability . The use of hazardous chemicals and the lack of industrial waste treatment expose populations to long-term health risks. Furthermore, despite its status as a country with extremely high biodiversity, the DRC is experiencing a gradual decline in animal and plant species . These imbalances exacerbate the effects of climate change, with rising temperatures, increasingly unpredictable seasons, and a rise in floods, droughts, and heat waves

Second, on a human level, environmental degradation has direct and serious consequences. It exacerbates food insecurity, contributes to the spread of disease, causes forced displacement, and marginalizes Indigenous peoples . Deforestation, soil and water pollution, and irregular seasons significantly reduce agricultural production, particularly in rural areas dependent on subsistence farming. Approximately 80% of diseases in the DRC are linked to environmental degradation, particularly waterborne and respiratory diseases. Evictions related to mining projects further exacerbate these situations and also affect communities' cultural and spiritual ties to their territories . Although the entire population is affected, rural communities, women, and Indigenous peoples are the most vulnerable. Women, in particular, are more likely to live in poverty and face significant difficulties in accessing land, resources, and justice . These inequalities exacerbate the social and ecological vulnerability of many families and limit their ability to cope with environmental crises .

Thus, environmental degradation in the DRC constitutes a genuine socio-ecological crisis that profoundly affects local populations. In this context, the designation “solution country” cannot remain a general slogan. It must be clarified and rethought to take into account the realities on the ground and the multiple environmental and human vulnerabilities facing the country.



02.2 Need for Clarification

The “solution country” designation in the DRC is not just a political slogan. It reflects a way of thinking about ecology that, as in other African countries, has gradually integrated environmental issues and their effects on populations into public policy since the 1990s, with the emergence of the discourse on sustainable development . This vision is based on a traditional approach that views nature through the services it provides to humans, such as water, forests, and soil . This framework is now central to development and environmental policies. It allows the DRC to seek a balance between biodiversity conservation and economic development. Added to this are recent initiatives promoting alternatives described as “green” that is, practices and technologies intended to reduce environmental impacts while supporting an economy that is more respectful of nature .

Although these initiatives are presented as responses to the global ecological crisis, they are fundamentally contradictory. Indeed, these initiatives remain largely dependent on dominant development models, based on continuous economic growth and the intensive exploitation of natural resources . Yet these models are difficult to reconcile with environmental protection goals. The coexistence of extractive activities and conservation policies reveals an ambivalent political ecology, which calls into question the DRC’s actual capacity to break with traditional development patterns . This situation can be explained in part by the desire to generate revenue from the exploitation of natural resources to finance growth and development, while relying on protected areas to demonstrate ecological commitments. But this approach quickly reveals its limitations. On the one hand, it fails to fundamentally transform an economic system that excludes local communities and Indigenous peoples. On the other hand, it reduces nature to an economic value, overlooking its cultural, social, and symbolic dimensions . This logic leads to the coexistence of ecological projects and extractive practices that, rather than protecting the environment, often contribute to its degradation.

These contradictions thus reveal a reformist Congolese political ecology that is, one in which the proposed ecological alternatives remain limited. They often take the form of ad hoc technical adjustments , without challenging dominant economic logics or taking into account the lived realities of local populations. These solutions do not foster

genuine social change, in which institutions, behaviors, and values would evolve together toward greater inclusion. By seeking to satisfy conflicting interests, they reproduce economy-centered responses that reinforce an unjust growth model and exacerbate social inequalities, while increasing pressure on the environment .

In this context, the issue of a just transition becomes essential. This White paper emphasizes the need for civil society and in particular for local communities and Indigenous peoples to participate fully in the discussion on the limitations of this Congolese political ecology, through debates on environmental justice . It is based on a simple idea: the problem is no longer a lack of solutions, but the difficulty of choosing among numerous and often conflicting proposals. Green alternatives indeed cover a wide range of approaches, ranging from technological solutions compatible with economic growth to more profound transformations of the system. They are part of various economic models such as the green economy, the circular economy, the social and solidarity economy, or degrowth all of which claim to reconcile development, ecology, and social justice.

Yet depending on the choices made, some of these approaches risk exacerbating existing imbalances, while others may pave the way for more equitable solutions. Those aimed at environmental justice require rethinking what we mean by wealth, value, and well-being, taking into account the planet's limits and the connections between human societies . They call for building a more ecological economy, grounded in local knowledge and experiences, and for moving beyond a view of nature reduced to mere exploitable capital . In a context where humanity seeks to restore balance with the living world, environmental justice also becomes a struggle to recognize the place of non-humans and to anchor ecological policies in local realities .

However, the DRC still appears to adhere to a very general vision of a just transition, largely aligned with the standards promoted by international institutions . These standards emphasize good governance, participation, redistribution, and environmental sustainability, but they also rely on universal solutions that take little account of local contexts and specific historical trajectories. As a result, they struggle to bring about a truly just transition for the Congolese people. In a country where concepts such as “solution country,” green alternatives, or the green economy now occupy a central place in public discourse, this situation is causing growing unease. It highlights the disconnect

between the stated sustainability ambitions and the persistence of extractive practices, while underscoring the urgency of a fundamental rethinking of political ecology in the DRC.

02.3

For a Just Transition

« Loss of land means loss of life, loss of identity, and loss of sovereignty [...] Yesterday it was the colonialists; today it is investors and extractive companies who claim to be developing our natural resources, but [who] are depleting our lands. »

(African Continental Forum on Mega-Dams and the Climate Crisis, Friday, June 27, 2025.)

This open-ended proposal draws on two sources: first, a body of field observations, case studies, and in-depth interviews conducted with local communities, Indigenous peoples, and civil society organizations in the DRC, as well as institutional stakeholders and donors; and second, comparisons with other experiences analyzed elsewhere and referenced in this document. The proposals set forth here are therefore not the result of an abstract theoretical exercise. They emerge directly from concrete situations observed in the field, from real environmental conflicts, from local resource management practices, and from existing collective mobilizations. Furthermore, the analysis presented in this White paper is framed within the context of environmental justice, a concept rooted in the civil rights movement that has highlighted how marginalized populations bear a disproportionate burden of pollution, ecological destruction, and health risks . This perspective is particularly relevant in the DRC. Since the colonial era, decisions regarding natural resources have largely been made without the involvement of the communities directly affected, often in the name of development, conservation, or, more recently, the ecological transition. This history continues to shape current environmental policies and fuel inequalities.

Three recurring observations emerge from this work, which constitute the three central messages of this White paper. First, environmental justice can no longer be conceived solely as a matter of redistributing benefits and burdens or of formal participation in decision-making: today, it must place central importance on recognizing local knowledge and wisdom, which enable a better definition of justice. Second, a truly just transition can only be built from the territories, based on local communities, their concrete realities, and the

specific problems they face. Finally, the just transition is fundamentally political: it is built through struggles, mobilizations, and power dynamics driven by the communities involved.

First, early approaches to environmental justice focused on redistribution: who benefits from natural resources and who bears the environmental costs . Subsequently, the emphasis shifted to populations' participation in decision-making processes . While these two dimensions remain essential, field studies conducted in the DRC clearly demonstrate their limitations when they are not accompanied by genuine recognition of local knowledge . Communities possess detailed knowledge of their territories: they understand water cycles, soil dynamics, forest uses, and the relationships between species. But they also have a better understanding of the challenges related to the distribution, participation, and governance of these resources. This knowledge shapes subsistence practices, local forms of environmental protection, ways of coping with environmental risks, and the dynamics among actors in various environmental conflicts. Yet it is still largely ignored or sidelined in favor of imported technical frameworks. This White paper advocates for the idea that environmental justice must fully integrate this local knowledge. This is not simply a matter of consulting or informing communities, but of recognizing their capacity to develop legitimate visions of nature, sustainability, and well-being, and enabling them to remain at the center of environmental governance. This recognition also addresses a historical injustice: the dismissal of local ways of thinking about and managing territories, a legacy of colonization that persists through certain contemporary policies. Without this recognition, the ecological transition remains incomplete and



perpetuates forms of injustice. This implies questioning how the interests of the state, corporations, and donors shape environmental policies and actions without taking into account the worldviews, the priorities, and interests of local communities, nor their own ways of conceiving the relationship between human societies, territories, and nature.

A second major lesson from this White paper concerns the need to territorialize the just transition. Many environmental policies are based on global models presented as universal, assuming that standardized solutions can be applied everywhere, regardless of social, cultural, and ecological contexts. The experiences analyzed demonstrate, however, that these approaches are often unsuccessful when they overlook local patterns of land use, existing land conflicts, social relations, or specific environmental constraints. Even projects presented as “green” can then produce negative effects: forced displacement, loss of livelihoods, and increased local tensions.

Territorializing the just transition means starting from the concrete realities of each territory. This implies recognizing that the relationships between societies and their living environments are always situated and that sustainability cannot be decreed from above. Certainly, the local is always connected to the provincial, regional, national, and global levels. It is therefore neither a retreat nor nostalgia. But it is also the scale at which compromises are forged, conflicts are expressed, and the everyday practices of managing and protecting life unfold. This approach is rooted in an anthropological and decolonial perspective that views territories as lived spaces, imbued with memory, social relations, and cultural meanings. A just transition can only be conceived in dialogue with these realities. This implies challenging standardized ecological proposals, which tend to smooth over conflicts, interests, and environmental solutions without examining how ecological issues, power relations, and forms of legitimacy, authority, and governance manifest differently across local contexts, territories, and social experiences.

Finally, the third key message of this White paper is the politicization of the just transition. Field research demonstrates that progress on environmental justice does not result from mere technical adjustments or consensus-based reforms. It is the product of collective mobilization, resistance, and struggles. In the DRC, local communities are organizing to defend their lands, forests, and livelihoods against extractive projects,

whether fossil fuel-based or marketed as “green.” These struggles serve as a reminder that the ecological transition cannot be separated from power dynamics, structural inequalities, and colonial legacies. Granting rights to communities is necessary, but insufficient. History shows that the law can be instrumentalized and stripped of its meaning if it is not supported by political and social dynamics. Rights are meaningful only if they are embedded in collective struggles capable of transforming power dynamics. A just transition must therefore be understood as a political process oriented toward autonomy, reparations, and ecological sovereignty, and not as a mere social or environmental corrective. This implies rethinking the organization of struggles arising from environmental conflicts, by examining the legitimacy of various actors, the distribution of power within these mobilizations, as well as the forms of alliance, representation, and collective action that structure these struggles with a view to establishing a truly just transition at the local level.

Based on these three proposals emerging from the field environmental justice centered on local knowledge, a transition rooted in local communities, and a conscious politicization of ecological change this White paper examines current choices in the DRC. It thus advocates for a truly just ecological transition, built in collaboration with communities, rooted in local realities, and driven by collective dynamics capable of sustainably transforming the relationship between human societies and nature.

This report is structured as a progressive journey, moving from an ecological assessment to the formulation of a vision for a just transition rooted in Congolese realities. Chapter 03 presents the study methodology, based on an interdisciplinary approach. Chapter 04 offers an analysis of the Congolese Anthropocene, a new way of conceptualizing environmental degradation based on the combined effects of deforestation, extractive industries, and climate change, highlighting their social, health, and political consequences for local communities, before summarizing the main imbalances. Chapter 05, meanwhile, offers an analysis of the Ecocene, a new way of thinking about life within a degraded environment in the Congolese context in order to capture the limitations of Congolese political ecology: it highlights the weaknesses of public action, the sectoral fragmentation of environmental responses, and the shortcoming of a model shaped by external interests. Chapter 6 examines the foundations of environmental justice through six case studies,

from carbon in Equateur (a former province) to the Congolese territories of Muanda, Inga, Katanga, Virunga, and Upemba, revealing the tensions between green promises and extractive realities. The report concludes with a critical synthesis and recommendations for a just transition in the DRC.



03

Methodology

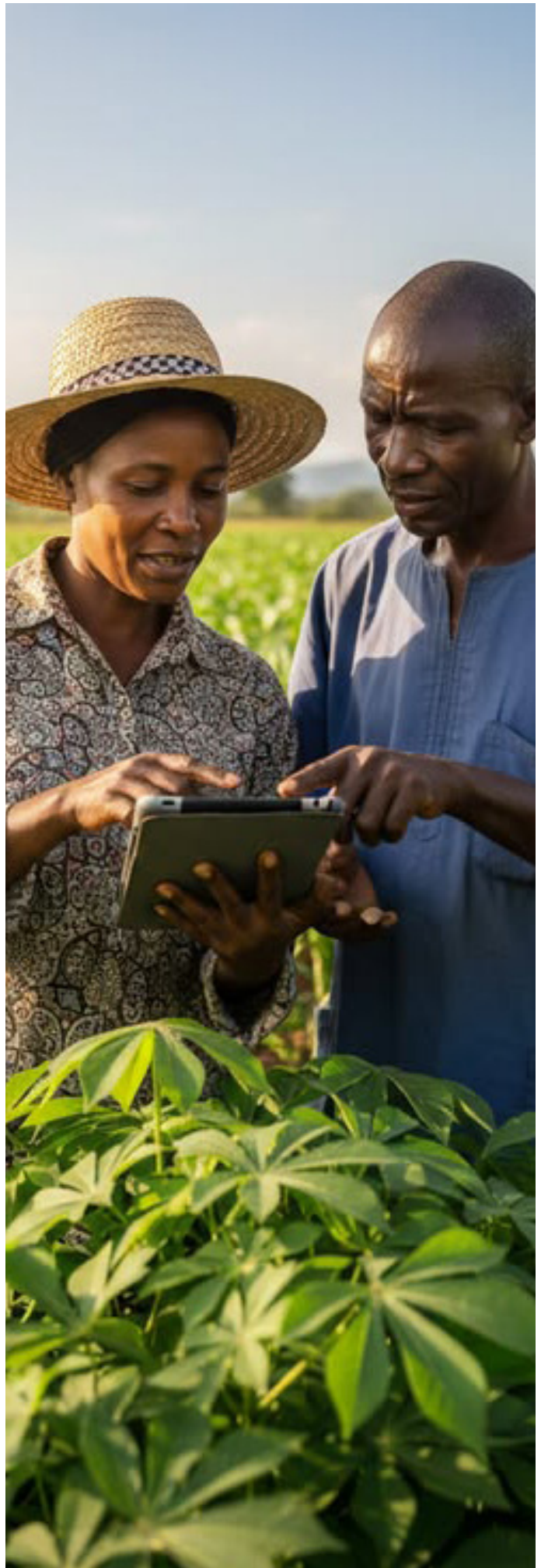
This research was designed to provide a comprehensive, critical, and context-specific understanding of ecological dynamics in the Democratic Republic of Congo, while exploring concrete alternatives for a just ecological transition. It is based on a qualitative, interdisciplinary, and participatory methodology, structured around three complementary objectives: analyzing the effects of the Anthropocene in the DRC, understanding Congolese political ecology in the face of these challenges, and identifying pathways to a just transition rooted in local communities. The challenge was not merely to describe environmental phenomena, but to grasp the deep-seated relationships between ecological degradation, social structures, historical legacies, and power dynamics.

The first objective was to define and characterize the Anthropocene within the Congolese context. This involved conducting a comprehensive assessment of the country's ecology by moving beyond sectoral approaches that isolate forests, mines, water, or agriculture. The analysis adopted an integrated perspective, attentive to the interdependencies between natural resources, human activities, and social dynamics. This approach made it possible to understand how pressures exerted on one ecosystem affect others, and how these transformations reshape people's living conditions. The Anthropocene was thus approached not as a global abstraction, but as a reality experienced on the ground. A historical perspective was central. It made it possible to trace the trajectories of degradation from the colonial period, marked by extractive resource development to contemporary forms of the mining, forestry, and agro-industrial economies. This genealogy highlighted the continuity of exploitative logics, as well as their transformations. It demonstrated how post-independence development policies have perpetuated, in different forms, models geared toward exports and growth through extraction, often at the expense of ecological balance and local needs. This historical analysis helped explain why current degradation cannot be reduced to isolated "bad practices," but is embedded in enduring economic and political structures.

This phase intended to answer three fundamental questions: What is the current state of environmental degradation in the DRC? What historical, social, economic, and political dynamics have led to it? What future trajectories are likely to emerge if no corrective action is taken? To answer these questions, the research drew on an in-depth review of the scientific literature, available environmental data, and institutional reports, supplemented by fieldwork based on observations, interviews, and discussions with various stakeholders including local communities, Indigenous peoples, civil society organizations, as well as institutional stakeholders and donors. The objective was to produce a rigorous yet context-specific analysis of the Congolese ecological crisis. This initial phase led to the adoption of a critical theoretical and epistemological framework. Rather than treating the environment as a mere technical object, the research focused on structural inequalities, socio-environmental conflicts, and local perceptions of environmental degradation and justice. A qualitative approach made it possible to document the ways in which communities perceive changes in their environment, the losses they have suffered, and the injustices they feel. From a decolonial perspective, attention was focused on local representations of environmental justice and transition, analyzing distributive injustices (who bears the costs and who benefits from resources), procedural injustices (who makes decisions and who is excluded from them), and injustices of recognition (which forms of knowledge and worldviews are valued or marginalized).

This White paper is thus based on case studies conducted in communities affected by the loss of access to water, farmland, forests, or sacred sites. These investigations were carried out using an action-research approach aimed at co-producing knowledge with the affected communities. The communities were viewed not merely as “beneficiaries” or “victims”, but as political actors capable of offering analyses, proposals, and alternative visions.

The methodology involved close collaboration with civil society organizations and community-based movements, which were regarded as research partners. Workshops, seminars, and discussion forums were organized to analyze the concrete effects of the frameworks imposed in relation to the just transition in the DRC. These forums provided an opportunity to scrutinize dominant concepts



such as sustainable development, conservation, the green economy, and the ecological or energy transition and their local manifestations. They highlighted the gaps between international and national discourses which often portray the DRC as a “solution country” for the global climate and the realities experienced by communities facing dispossession, pollution, and precarious living conditions.

A critical analysis of public policies, NGO reports, and the National Strategic Development Plan constituted another essential dimension of the research. It helped identify the asymmetries between dominant narratives and local experiences, and between promises of green development and the concrete effects of extractive or conservation projects. This approach revealed how certain environmental policies, while claiming to promote sustainability, can perpetuate forms of exclusion and social violence.

The second objective of the research was to analyze Congolese political ecology that is, institutional and governmental responses to the Anthropocene’s challenges. After assessing ecological dynamics, this phase examined the solutions promoted by the state and the concepts underlying them, such as sustainable development, the green economy, and the ecological transition. The challenge was to understand the political economy of these responses: their origins, how they are implemented, the actors involved, and the interests they serve.

This analysis drew on semi-structured interviews, focus groups, and an in-depth literature review. It made it possible to assess the coherence, effectiveness, and human and environmental impacts of ecological policies. Particular attention was paid to the influence of international frameworks and donors. The central hypothesis was that Congolese political ecology is largely shaped by imported solutions, often designed elsewhere and ill-suited to local realities. This phase highlighted the power dynamics among national actors, companies, international partners, and communities, as well as the tensions between sovereignty, financial dependence, and global imperatives.

The third objective was to explore alternatives for a just transition. Rather than starting with global models, this phase drew on local initiatives and the experiences of marginalized groups in extractive regions. The central idea is that the very consequences of extractivism can become starting points for devising alternative paths. The research identified emerging community-led solutions: access to clean energy, community-based forest protection, alternative agricultural practices, carbon initiatives, and more. This phase also analyzed emerging political concepts: just transition, loss and damage, territorial sustainability to develop proposals tailored to the Congolese context. Particular attention was paid to groups affected by forced displacement linked to extractive projects. The methods employed included field observations, semi-structured interviews, documentary analysis, and ethnographic case studies. Focus groups and participatory workshops were used to gather communities’ perspectives and priorities.

Taken as a whole, this multidimensional methodology allows us to conceptualize the Anthropocene in the DRC not as an abstract crisis, but as a situated social and political reality. It combines analysis, critique, and proposals, placing communities at the center of the discussion on environmental justice and the country’s ecological future. It thus aims to contribute to a just transition grounded in lived experiences, local knowledge, and the aspirations of the most vulnerable populations.

04. THE ANTHROPOCENE IN THE DRC :

Environmental and Human Impacts

The term “Anthropocene” refers to an era in which human activities are profoundly transforming the planet: global warming, deforestation, pollution, and species extinction . This term serves as a reminder that these upheavals are not natural; they are the result of our collective choices. The DRC is at the heart of these transformations. It is home to one of the world’s largest tropical rainforests, which is essential for the planet’s climate . Yet this natural wealth is now seriously threatened. Deforestation, mining, logging, and oil extraction are degrading the soil, rivers, and ecosystems. These activities are often presented as drivers of development. But on the ground, it is primarily local communities that pay the price: loss of land, food insecurity, health issues, and conflicts over resources. The paradox is striking: the DRC is indispensable to the global ecological transition, yet it is one of the countries hardest hit by environmental and social crises.



04.1 Environmental Assessment

The DRC covers an area of 2,345,000 km² and is home to 60% of the Congo Basin's forests, the world's second-largest forest region after the Amazon, covering 145 million hectares. In Africa, the DRC boasts the highest level of biodiversity thanks to its large land area and wide range of habitats. It plays a fundamental role in global climate regulation, absorbing approximately 1.5 billion metric tons of CO₂ per year and storing nearly 40 billion metric tons of carbon. These forests also provide livelihoods, food security, and health benefits to Indigenous and rural populations, while harboring exceptional biodiversity, placing the DRC among the ten "mega-biodiversity" countries. At the same time, the DRC lost approximately 10 million hectares of forest between 1990 and 2010. Between 2002 and 2024, the DRC lost 7.45 million hectares of primary rainforests, accounting for 36% of the total loss of tree cover, which corresponds to a 7.1% reduction in its primary rainforest area. This figure indicates a loss of approximately 13 to 15 million hectares of forest between 1990 and 2025.

The energy used by poor populations comes almost exclusively from firewood, which accounts for 91.5% of the Congolese population's energy consumption. Forests are also an important source of building materials, particularly for housing, as 64% of rural households live in rammed-earth homes. A 2021 study by Rainforest Foundation UK challenges the notion that smallholder farmers are primarily responsible for deforestation. The study reveals a dynamic known as "cascading deforestation" driven by commercial logging, in which small-scale agriculture is more of an immediate consequence than a structural driver. Other major causes include shifting slash-and-burn agriculture, firewood collection, and artisanal or industrial mining.

In terms of carbon, the DRC has approximately 24.5 gigatons (GT) of carbon stored in living forest biomass (above-ground and below-ground). More than half of this carbon is concentrated in 28% of the national territory. In terms of protected area management, 40 officially designated protected areas cover approximately 10% of the territory, storing 2.8 Gt of forest biomass. Another 17 proposed protected areas could add approximately 0.7 Gt. Densely forested areas are home to 80 concessions covering 6% of the country's territory and storing 2.4 GT of biomass carbon. Mining activities represent a substantial pressure: depending on the source, ~4.8 Mha are designated for mining and ~57 Mha for exploration (2011 data), and more recently, ~11.6% of the national territory is covered by mining titles (excluding artisanal mining), with overlaps with protected areas. Deforestation is increasing at an average rate of approximately 0.2–0.3% per year ($\approx 0.23\%$ per year for 2000–2010/2015), which, combined with mining pressures, may reduce the multiple benefits of ecosystems by affecting carbon storage

and biodiversity . Preliminary analyses show that the DRC has considerable potential for carbon management under REDD+, but pressures from natural resource exploitation remain a major challenge to the success of this mechanism.

As for the mining sector, it is a pillar of the Congolese economy. In 2022, it contributed 6.82 percentage points to GDP growth. In 2023, the DRC produced 2.84 million metric tons of copper and 139,838 metric tons of cobalt, confirming its position as a global leader . Added to this are smaller but geostrategically important volumes of gold, cassiterite, and coltan . However, this sector has major environmental impacts. In terms of deforestation, between 2001 and 2025, the rise in mining activity, particularly in the Katanga and Lualaba provinces has accelerated deforestation. AFREWATCH reports a forest loss of 7,120 km² in Katanga, including 498.4 km² in Haut-Katanga and 388.5 km² in Lualaba . Nevertheless, studies published in **Nature Sustainability** estimate that indirect impacts (infrastructure and, above all, agricultural expansion) around artisanal mines result in deforestation that is, on average, 28 times greater than the area directly cleared for the mine . In terms of soil degradation and erosion, mining causes soil erosion, gully formation, landslides, land subsidence, and chemical contamination of the soil (mining tailings). For example, in Kasai Oriental [province], industrial diamond mines have led to the loss of agricultural land and rapid erosion .

All these factors contribute to pollution and the loss of biodiversity. Indeed, mining in the DRC poses a major threat to biodiversity due to the direct destruction of habitats, the fragmentation of forest ecosystems, and soil and water pollution. Many mining concessions overlap with protected areas and priority conservation zones, exacerbating pressure on already threatened species . The construction of mining infrastructure also facilitates illegal hunting and the unsustainable exploitation of natural resources .

In the land sector, the DRC covers 2.3 million km², equivalent to the size of Western Europe . It has 80 million hectares of arable land and 4 million hectares of irrigable land, of which only 1% is cultivated . Nearly 70% of the population depends directly on the land for its livelihood . However, this vast untapped agricultural potential brings little benefit to local populations, judging by the state of food security in the country. Furthermore, the overexploitation of land in the DRC is accompanied by a severe shortage of vacant land, with the average cultivated area estimated at 0.3 to 0.4 hectares per household, according to various official and nongovernmental sources. This shortage is largely due to land grabbing by powerful actors. Land disputes are recurrent: it is frequently argued in the specialized literature that up to 80% of cases brought before the courts are directly or indirectly related to land and real estate , often exacerbated by extractive activities, industrial concessions, and population displacement. Land concentration, speculation, and the lack of secure land titles particularly for women and Indigenous peoples reinforce structural inequalities.

With regard to the water sector, the DRC possesses water resources that are unique in Africa, thanks to its geostrategic position in terms of hydrology and its membership in four major regional river basins (the Nile, the Congo, Lake Kivu, and Lake Tanganyika). It holds 52% of Africa's surface freshwater reserves, 23% of the continent's renewable water resources, and 10% of the world's freshwater potential, while accounting for barely 1% of the world's population . This potential places the DRC at the center of African challenges related to water security, irrigated agriculture, and hydropower.

But despite this abundance, actual water availability is compromised by mining pollution (heavy metals, chemicals), plastics, untreated industrial waste, and the effects of climate change (droughts, falling water levels). The Ubangi River, for example, experiences severe low-water conditions, affecting its navigability and endangering more than 100,000 km² of tropical peatlands through which it flows in the Central Basin. Thirty-three million people in rural areas lack access to safe drinking water; only 52% of the population has access to an improved water source, and 29% to adequate sanitation facilities. This infrastructure deficit is a major driver of cholera epidemics, which recur in several provinces .

In terms of climate, the DRC remains one of the countries that are most vulnerable to climate change and its effects, as it is ill-prepared to cope with them . Ranked 167th out of 187, the DRC is the 21st most vulnerable country in the 2022 ND-GAIN Index and one of the least prepared to cope with the effects of climate change (189th out of 192 countries). The most common climate risks for the DRC are heavy rains, seasonal droughts,

riverine flooding, coastal erosion, and heat waves .

As for energy, the DRC has globally recognized hydroelectric potential. The DRC's hydroelectric potential stands at 100,000 MW, or 13% of the world's total, with 42% of that concentrated at the Inga site on the Congo River. This potential is equivalent to 30 million metric tons of oil equivalent (MTOE) per year, or about four times the country's current energy consumption . However, despite this potential, the electricity access rate in the DRC was only 6.67% in 2022; the geographic coverage rate (electrified localities/total population) is only 36%; and the service rate (population actually connected in electrified areas) remains capped at 18.6% . Furthermore, disparities are considerable: while 47.2% of households in urban areas are connected to the grid, only 2% are in rural areas. The grid is also obsolete and poorly maintained, with service quality declining in cities .

The DRC's reliance on wood for energy exceeds 90%, with an estimated annual consumption of approximately 70 to 80 million cubic meters of wood harvested each year for energy purposes . Wood energy is therefore the main cause of deforestation in the DRC, leading to a loss of biodiversity and the disappearance of many endemic species (bonobos, gorillas, etc.). According to the same sources cited above, the deforestation rate linked to wood energy is approximately 0.3% per year in absolute volume, representing more than 500,000 ha of forest lost each year. Between 2010 and 2024, the estimated volume of wood energy consumed in the DRC increased from 60 million cubic meters to approximately 85 million cubic meters, while the deforestation rate rose from about 0.20% to 0.34%. These data, drawn from reports by the FAO, UN-REDD, WRI, and Global Forest Watch, illustrate a continuous increase in firewood consumption and an acceleration of deforestation in the country over the years.

Finally, regarding hydrocarbons, the DRC's reserves are estimated at 22 billion barrels of crude oil and 66 billion cubic meters of methane gas (primarily in Lake Kivu) . These resources could position the DRC among the world's major producers. However, this ambition is in sharp conflict with biodiversity conservation concerns and the rights of local communities. Indeed, the current government continues to view hydrocarbon development as a key driver of economic growth, while downplaying the risks in both short and long-term. The Congolese authorities' view which sees oil extraction as an economic windfall cannot obscure the fact that such extraction remains incompatible with efforts to prevent the irreversible damage caused by climate change and human-induced disasters .



04.2

Human Impacts

As noted, the DRC is home to the world's second-largest tropical forest, containing approximately 40 gigatons of carbon (equivalent to 140 Gt of potential CO₂ equivalent), Africa's greatest biodiversity, more than 50% of the continent's freshwater resources, and nearly 80 million hectares of arable land. It provides vital environmental services at all levels: international (climate), regional (water), and above all to the Congolese population, particularly the poorest. Natural resources and the environment make a crucial contribution to the living conditions of Congolese households (micro level) on the one hand, and to national production on the other (macro level). Thus, the living conditions of poor populations depend fundamentally on the state of the environment. The Congolese people, particularly the poorest among them, draw from the environment the resources necessary to meet a large portion of their needs, notably in terms of income, food, health, energy, housing, and security.

In this sense, environmental degradation in the DRC is not merely an ecological phenomenon; it also constitutes a major social crisis with profound repercussions on the lives of local populations, particularly the most vulnerable. This vulnerability manifests itself, in particular, as food insecurity. Food insecurity is a major problem in the DRC, affecting 41.7% of the population in 2022. It stems largely from environmental degradation, including deforestation, soil and water pollution, and the effects of climate change, which are making growing seasons increasingly unpredictable. These factors have a direct impact on crop productivity and access to food, particularly in rural areas, where people depend almost exclusively on subsistence farming and foraging.

In fact, in the DRC, approximately 70% of the population lives in rural areas, and these households are more affected by poverty than those in urban areas (75% versus 61%). Their economy relies on agriculture, fishing, foraging, hunting, and logging, which provide both income and food. Subsistence agriculture, which accounts for about 90% of agricultural production, is primarily shifting cultivation and slash-and-burn farming. The decline in soil fertility severely affects



the nutrition of rural populations, reducing agricultural yields and increasing food insecurity .

Forest products also play a crucial role in food security. Approximately 75% of the animal protein consumed by rural households comes from wildlife , “while 10 to 40% of the animal protein consumed in the DRC comes from caterpillars, insects, and larvae” . However, the overexploitation of game with harvests four times higher than sustainable levels is leading to the gradual disappearance of these resources, directly affecting the food supply of local populations, who do not always have alternative sources of protein . Furthermore, 94% of game catches are sold, generating significant revenue, particularly in urban areas, where they are a key source of jobs and income . Food insecurity, which affects approximately 33% of households in the DRC, with peaks of nearly 60% in the eastern provinces , is therefore linked to these dynamics of environmental degradation and overexploitation of natural resources.

Women are disproportionately affected by the consequences of environmental degradation. According to figures from the Office of the Special Advisor on Poverty, 75.6% of women live below the poverty line, compared to 51.5% of men . Women and Indigenous peoples have limited access to land . Furthermore, women are also much more vulnerable to gender-based violence, which is exacerbated by social instability and displacement . Furthermore, ecological and social instability also has repercussions on the schooling of children, particularly girls . The environmental crisis affects all Congolese people, but rural populations, women, and Indigenous communities face a combination of economic, ecological, and social inequalities, making them particularly vulnerable to the impacts of the Anthropocene.

97% of children in the DRC do not have reading proficiency by the age of 10 . Children from displaced families, mining areas, or areas affected by environmental conflicts are particularly disadvantaged. With regard to forced displacement and land grabbing, many local communities are forcibly evicted from their farmland to make way for industrial mining projects . These evictions are often carried out without regard for national legal frameworks intended to protect populations from abusive expropriation. Access to land thus becomes a central issue of environmental justice.

Despite its tremendous potential as a water resource accounting for 52% of the continent’s water reserves 33 million people in rural areas lack access to safe drinking

water. Only 52% of the population has access to an improved water source, and 29% to improved sanitation facilities . The rate of access to safe drinking water in urban areas has declined, falling from 96% in 2015 to 77% in 2025. This decline is primarily attributed to rapid urban population growth, inadequate infrastructure, and the deterioration of existing services, particularly those provided by Regideso. In contrast, coverage in rural areas remains very low: according to the JMP, 31% of communities used an “improved” water source in 2015, and 13.3% used at least a basic drinking water service in 2022 . Access remains limited, due in particular to a lack of investment and the dispersion of rural populations across their regions. Although these figures may vary significantly depending on the methodologies used and the sources of information, it is clear that the challenges facing the DRC in terms of water resources remain considerable.

Water resources are essential for agricultural activities, fishing, and domestic use. Approximately 3% of the Congolese population relies directly on fishing for their livelihood . According to a study of the agricultural sector: “Exploitation of most fisheries across all bodies of water appears to have reached maximum sustainable yield. The overall long-term sustainability of fishery resources appears to be compromised in certain areas of these bodies of water” . Unsustainable fisheries management contributes to a decline in their productivity, with consequences for the nutrition of the population. Some Congolese fisheries are also affected by industrial water pollution, particularly around Kinshasa. Pollution of the waters of the Malebo Pool thus renders the fish unfit for consumption .

In terms of health, nearly 80% of diseases in the DRC are linked to environmental degradation . Among the most common conditions are waterborne infections (cholera, dysentery), respiratory diseases caused by air pollution, as well as skin diseases and poisonings resulting from mining pollution . Unsanitary conditions, limited access to safe drinking water, and inadequate sanitation infrastructure exacerbate the risk of epidemics in many provinces.

Environmental risk factors account for a significant proportion of health problems, reaching up to 30% in sub-Saharan Africa . This figure could even rise to as much as 50% when malnutrition is taken into account, given its frequent association with soil degradation, overexploitation of natural resources, and climate change. In the DRC, studies indicate that the proportion of cases of diseases linked to poor

environmental conditions could reach 80% . Only 52% of Congolese households have access to safe drinking water from an improved source, which explains the prevalence of waterborne diseases, such as cholera and diarrhea, particularly among children under 5 years of age . Waterway pollution, particularly from the use of chemicals in mining and the discharge of industrial waste, directly affects the population, especially in urban and peri-urban areas.

The sanitation system in the DRC is underdeveloped: only 14% of households have hygienic toilets , and 25% of households properly disposed of household waste in 1999 . These unsanitary conditions lead to numerous vector-borne diseases, notably malaria, which remains the leading cause of morbidity in the DRC, affecting 97% of the population . Air pollution, caused by the use of wood-energy (89% of the fuel used in rural areas), also leads to respiratory diseases, which particularly affect women. The poor environmental conditions also hinder effective access to medical care, forcing many Congolese to rely on medicinal plants to treat common illnesses.

In terms of physical security, Congolese people, particularly the poorest, who live in degraded environments are especially vulnerable to natural disasters and environmental conflicts. Pressure on natural resources, such as land and water, exacerbated by environmental degradation, can lead to conflicts. In the Kivu provinces, for example, the armed conflict is rooted in a land access issue and is fueled by the illegal exploitation of natural resources, which allows armed groups to finance their activities. These conflicts contribute to instability and insecurity in the DRC, particularly affecting the most vulnerable populations .

Environmental degradation is also a major source of vulnerability to natural disasters, which disproportionately affect poor populations. In sub-Saharan Africa, 39% of the poor live on fragile land . The ongoing expansion of slums around the DRC's major urban centers is taking place in particularly vulnerable areas, exposing communities to flooding and erosion . In Mbuji-Mayi and Kinshasa, particularly in Kisenso, Selembao, and Mont-Ngafula Municipalities, houses regularly collapse due to erosion. These phenomena are exacerbated by deforestation and the lack of rainwater drainage systems or adequate waste management systems, thereby increasing the vulnerability of urban areas to natural disasters .

There is a significant lack of official data and studies on the environmental impact of the hydrocarbons sector, but Greenpeace considers oil and gas projects to be "catastrophic" for the environment, for the Congolese rainforest, and for its exceptional biodiversity in the areas targeted for oil extraction (Ituri, Virunga, Mai-Ndombe). The "Notre terre sans pétrole"(Our Land Without Oil) coalition, for its part, emphasizes the disastrous effects of oil extraction on the territories and livelihoods of local populations, particularly in Muanda .

Finally, the environmental crisis also affects the cultural and spiritual dimensions of many Indigenous communities. Organizations such as Minority Rights Group report the loss of sacred sites and spiritual practices, especially among Indigenous peoples.



04.3 Conclusion

The environmental situation in the DRC is currently a matter of serious concern. Every year, the country loses vast areas of forest, among the richest on the planet. This deforestation is driven by several practices: commercial logging, slash-and-burn agriculture, and mining. These activities destroy primary forests, which play a vital role: they regulate water, protect soils, store carbon, and support food security. Their disappearance directly undermines people's daily lives by disrupting agricultural cycles, depleting resources, and exacerbating food insecurity.

The environmental degradation is further compounded by the effect of climate change: unpredictable rainfall, droughts, floods, and landslides. Rural communities, already vulnerable, bear the brunt of these consequences. Behind these phenomena lie deep-rooted causes. They trace back to the colonial era, which organized the economy around resource extraction without regard for sustainability. After independence, this approach largely continued: development was conceived primarily as the intensive exploitation of natural resources, particularly minerals. This dependence reinforced a vision of unlimited growth, often at the expense of ecological balance, in a context marked by weak regulations, lack of transparency, and corruption.

If nothing changes, the outlook is cause for concern. The DRC risks seeing an acceleration in biodiversity loss, the degradation of agricultural land, and the deterioration of living conditions for rural populations. Conflicts over land, forests, and minerals could intensify. The disappearance of forests will weaken vital functions: protection against natural disasters, climate regulation, and access to water. Ultimately, the country could become increasingly vulnerable to climate shocks, while losing its ability to contribute to global ecological balance even though the Congo Basin is one of the planet's great "green lungs."

These challenges demonstrate that the environmental crisis in the DRC is not merely ecological: it is also social, economic, and political. It calls for a profound transformation in the way we think about development. The following section will analyze the role that Congolese political ecology is attempting to play in addressing these challenges, as well as the obstacles hindering a truly sustainable transition capable of reconciling the protection of natural resources with the legitimate development needs of the population.

05

ECOCENE IN THE DRC :

Limitations of congolese political ecology

The “Ecocene” refers to a new way of thinking about our era . Whereas the Anthropocene primarily highlights the damage caused by humanity, the Ecocene calls for a change of course. It calls for a shift from a paradigm of destruction towards one centered on restoration, care, and profound transformation. It is no longer just a matter of limiting the damage, but of restoring ecosystems, rethinking our relationship with nature, and building more just and sustainable ways of life. In the DRC, this perspective is particularly important. The country plays a major role in the global climate thanks to its forests, rivers, and biodiversity. Increasingly, the DRC is being presented as a “solution country” in the face of ecological crises. Positive initiatives are emerging such as agroforestry, ecotourism, and sustainable fishing which demonstrate that a different relationship with nature is possible. Yet these initiatives coexist with an economic model based on the intensive extraction of resources: minerals, oil, and timber. Often, nature is reduced to its economic value. This contradiction limits the real impact of environmental policies and perpetuates deep social inequalities. The Ecocene therefore calls for going further: not protecting nature merely to exploit it more effectively, but fundamentally rethinking development and governance by placing territories, communities, and the living world at the heart of political decisions.

05.1

Limits of Public Action



Since the late 1960s, the Congolese government has rolled out numerous plans and programs to stimulate national development . Yet their impact on poverty reduction and more specifically on food security remains limited. Several structural and institutional factors account for these modest results. The “Zairianization” and nationalization policies of the 1970s triggered a massive withdrawal of private investment from the agricultural sector, the effects of which continue to be felt today. Political instability has undermined the continuity of public policies, compromising their coherence. The structural adjustment programs of the late 1980s exacerbated the sector’s chronic underfunding, leading to the deterioration of agricultural infrastructure and poor project management. Added to this were the armed conflicts of the 1990s, as well as the policies of the 2000s focused on macroeconomic stabilization and the control of urban food prices. Far from restoring balance, these dynamics have permanently weakened the rural sector and exacerbated its vulnerability.

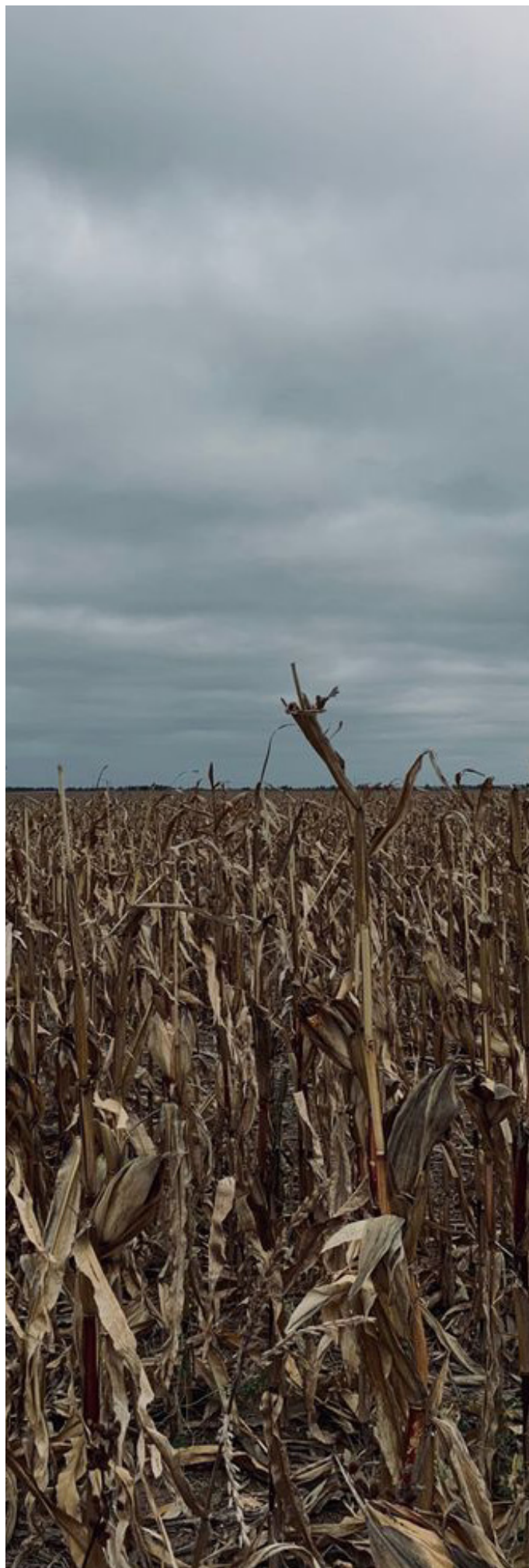
In fact, public policies regarding natural resource management in the DRC are based on a comprehensive set of legislative, strategic, and regulatory texts. This framework appears relatively robust on a formal level, but its dynamics of evolution remains uneven. While adjustments have been made particularly since the 2010s, they remain slow and often incomplete, underscoring the importance of a historical perspective to understand continuities and discontinuities. The 2011 Law on Environmental Protection marks a significant milestone: it explicitly and firmly incorporates environmental concerns into public policy. It also ushers in a trend toward greater cross-cutting approaches and intersectoral coordination, even if these efforts are still in their infancy. Through various national plans and strategic documents led notably by the Ministry of Planning and other sectoral ministries, a certain commitment to coherence is emerging. However, their scope remains limited by fragmented institutional structures and a lack of prioritization. The influence of the international agenda is evident: instruments such as the EITI, the REDD+ mechanism, and multilateral environmental commitments shape the directions taken. This orientation reflects both a desire to align with global standards and a strategy aimed at attracting financing and strengthening the Congolese government's international legitimacy.

The 2005 Constitution, by affirming that natural resources must benefit all Congolese people, reinforced the centrality of these resources in the national development agenda. Over time, this constitutional recognition of the central role of resources in national development has been reinterpreted from a more geopolitical perspective: since the 2020s, Congolese authorities have been promoting the idea of a “solution country,” positioning the DRC as a key player in addressing global climate challenges. However, this ambition raises legitimate questions about its feasibility in a context of governance that remains largely deficient, where corruption, institutional shortcomings, governance challenges, and conflicts of interest regularly undermine stated intentions. Finally, despite certain merits such as raising awareness of environmental issues and mobilizing international actors public policies struggle to translate into concrete action on the ground. The persistent gap between policy documents and their implementation, unforeseen adverse effects, structural discrimination (against women, Indigenous peoples, and rural populations), an increasing emphasis on the private sector at the expense of local communities and Indigenous peoples, and the lack of a shared vision limit the effectiveness and inclusivity of these policies.

Furthermore, there has been a lack of vision regarding the relationship between environmental degradation and development. While the DRC has invested heavily in biodiversity conservation, these initiatives have remained insufficient to achieve both environmental protection and poverty reduction. Today, the National Strategic Development Plan (PNSD), developed and coordinated by the Ministry of Planning, serves as the central tool for socioeconomic planning in the DRC. Its implementation relies on intersectoral collaboration—particularly with the Ministry of the Environment—to integrate environmental and forestry considerations into development policies. The 2019–2023 PNSD, followed by the 2024–2028 version, explicitly lists environmental protection among its strategic priorities. This coordination is reflected in the division of roles: the Ministry of Planning is responsible for planning and monitoring, while the Ministry of Environment is responsible for technical and regulatory implementation.

Faced with the many challenges in the rural sector, government authorities have attempted to respond, but the results have been mixed. Since the late 1960s, several documents, plans, and programs have been drafted and implemented to promote the country's overall development, with a particular focus on the rural sector. Unfortunately, although these initiatives have enjoyed some political success, they have failed to eradicate poverty among the Congolese masses or ensure food security. These plans and programs share several common characteristics. On the one hand, they have, to a certain extent, identified the problems facing the Congolese rural sector and proposed solutions albeit general ones to address them. On the other hand, they have raised both national and international awareness of the problems in the rural sector and attracted some foreign investment.

However, several contradictions and factors explain the poor performance of these various plans. Among these is the divestment from agriculture following the controversial “Zairianization” measures of 1973 and the nationalization of 1974, which led to a loss of confidence among private investors, a situation that has still not been rectified. Constant changes in government have also led to a never-ending cycle of starting over, as new leaders often lack a grasp of previous policies and sometimes seek to make a clean break with the past. Furthermore, the deterioration of existing infrastructure (transportation networks, product storage and preservation) and agricultu-



ral support services, such as research and extension services, has significantly affected the sector. The lack of significant financial resources reflected in the small share of the national budget allocated to the agricultural sector (less than 2%) has also hindered any meaningful improvement. Finally, the mismanagement of government services and rural development projects, as well as inappropriate macroeconomic policies, have exacerbated the sector's problems. Structural adjustment reforms have, moreover, had adverse effects, particularly in the agricultural and rural sectors .

More recently, as we have seen, the DRC has embarked on an ecological transition. This transition has been gradually integrated into public policies through a set of institutional bodies aimed at reconciling sustainable development, ecosystem protection, and economic transformation. The Congolese Agency for Ecological Transition and Sustainable Development (ACTEDD), a specialized unit within the Office of the President, plays a central role in this effort. It views the ecological transition as a holistic process combining several dimensions: the energy transition toward renewable energy, the sustainable management of natural resources (forests, agriculture, water), the development of green infrastructure (sustainable cities, eco-villages), the promotion of the circular economy, the strengthening of environmental legislation, and public awareness campaigns. Its approach emphasizes an integrated vision of transforming the economic and social model, focused on sustainability, resilience, and intergenerational justice .

The Ministry of Environment and Sustainable Development structures its strategy around building a green, low-carbon economy designed to be resilient to the effects of climate change. It focuses on key sectors: sustainable forest and land management, ecological agriculture, the promotion of renewable energy, land reform, and land-use planning. These priorities are driven by an integrated rural development project, supported by the creation of an interministerial consultation framework and the National New Energy Service (SENEN), which is responsible for planning, overseeing, and promoting non-conventional energy sources such as solar, hydroelectric, wind, and biomass. The ministry also states its intention to integrate environmental considerations into other strategic sectors such as health, mining, and local governance.

At the same time, the Congolese Institute for Nature Conservation (ICCN) advocates a geostrategic vision of the ecological transition, in which the DRC's exceptional natural resources tropical forests, megabiodiversity, freshwater, and strategic minerals are presented as major assets in the fight against global climate change. This position portrays the DRC as a "solution country," emphasizing the role that Congolese resources could play in the global energy transition. The ICCN argues that the local processing of strategic minerals could stimulate the creation of sustainable jobs, generate domestic revenue, and strengthen economic sovereignty while promoting more equitable and environmentally sustainable exploitation.

However, ambitious as these institutional visions may be, they struggle to effect a genuine epistemological and practical rupture. In attempting to reconcile contradictory imperatives economic growth, the profitability of extractive industries, environmental conservation, and social justice they often remain trapped within a technocratic and economistic framework that, moreover, suffers from underfunding. The transition is thus conceived as a mere adjustment to the dominant model, without challenging the structural logics of extractivism, the commodification of nature, and the centralization of decision-making. Social, cultural, and political innovation which is essential for profound change remains marginalized. This lack of systemic transformation reinforces social inequalities by rendering invisible local knowledge, the alternatives championed by local communities and Indigenous peoples, and the aspirations for ecological justice rooted in local territories. In short, far from promoting a truly just and inclusive transition, these policies risk reproducing past imbalances under the guise of "greening" practices.

The result is a hybrid model that oscillates between utilitarian conservation and sustainable exploitation, without successfully and sustainably reconciling ecological imperatives, demands for justice, and the aspirations of the people.

05.2

Sector-Specific Assessment

Beyond this overall assessment of Congolese political ecology, a sector-specific analysis is necessary. With regard to forests, first of all, the legal framework governing the DRC's forests has evolved slowly, moving from the colonial decree of 1949 to a modernized Forest Code adopted only in 2002. The latter sets forth without guaranteeing their effectiveness principles of participatory management and a three-tier classification of forests (classified forests, protected forests, and permanent production forests). Despite a moratorium imposed in 2002 on the granting of new forest concessions reinforced in 2005 by presidential decree violations are systematic. In 2022, the ministry was forced to temporarily suspend 12 illegally granted concessions covering more than 1.9 million hectares, though this decision has yet to be enforced, illustrating the gulf between legal commitments and effective governance. Forest management remains a secondary priority, lacking a dedicated ministry, with delayed legal reforms and key institutions such as the ICCN and the FFN suffering from understaffing. Since 2009, the DRC has been engaged in the REDD+ mechanism, which involves ambitious cross-sectoral coordination supported by a framework strategy and an investment plan exceeding one billion dollars. Among the goals announced for 2023 were stabilizing forest cover at 63.5 percent, reducing annual forest loss by 10 percent, suspending non-compliant concessions, and expanding the network of protected areas to 17 percent of the national territory. At the same time, the DRC renewed its regional and international commitments through the Yaoundé Declaration and the COMIFAC Convergence Plan, affirming its commitment to reconciling conservation, sovereignty, and development, although results remain well below targets.

Since 2009, the DRC has integrated the fight against climate change into its policies through the REDD+ process and the publication, in 2015, of its first NDC. The NDC sets targets of a 17% reduction in GHG emissions and an increase in forest cover to 60% by 2030. The updated NDC, published in conjunction with the REDD+ agreement reached with the CAFI initiative (2021–2030), raises this ambition to a 21% reduction, while identifying an estimated financing need of \$48 billion. These commitments face several specific constraints, notably the absence of a national REDD+ carbon registry, which limits transparency in the issuance and traceability of carbon credits. Furthermore, weak forest governance marked by regulatory gaps and a lack of oversight of concessions hinders the mobilization of tax revenues. Finally, institutional capacity to identify, plan, and implement climate projects remains limited, particularly outside the forestry sector.

Regarding the land sector, since the 1970s, land legislation in the DRC has been based on Land Law No. 73-021 of 1973, which grants the State exclusive and inalienable ownership of land. This law provides for land-use concessions perpetual for Congolese citizens and ordinary (generally 25 years, renewable) for everyone else but it coexists with a very active customary system, especially in rural areas, where traditional chiefs collectively manage the land on behalf of the communities. This legal dualism creates complexity between state land titles and customary rights, which are often intertwined, leading to insecurity and land conflicts. Concessions are more common in urban and commercial agricultural areas, while rural land remains predominantly under customary control. The system favors elites and men; women have very limited access to land rights, often subject to their husbands' authorization, despite constitutional guarantees. Ethnic and geographic discrimination also marginalizes certain groups, particularly internal "migrants." Furthermore, the absence of supplementary regulatory texts weakens the coherence of the legal framework. The 2002 Forest Code affirms state ownership of forests but does not amend the 1973 Land Law. This situation complicates the management of forest concessions, which do not confer ownership of the land but only the right to exploit it. This dualistic and discriminatory framework threatens the security of land rights, particularly for local communities and vulnerable groups, and could compromise the effectiveness of mechanisms such as REDD+ due to land insecurity, corruption, and a lack of rigorous enforcement.



An analysis of legal instruments governing forest and related resources reveals a gradual evolution in the legal framework for forest resource management in the DRC between 2000 and 2025. These instruments demonstrate a growing intent to formalize and organize forest management while strengthening environmental protection and the sustainability of forest resources. One of the first major milestones was the adoption of Law No. 011/2002 of August 29, 2002, which established the Forest Code and set forth the legal framework for sustainable forest management in the DRC. This foundational text was supplemented by ministerial orders in 2002 and 2006, which regulate forest transactions and the organization of the forest cadastre, respectively, thereby strengthening the administrative mechanisms governing forests. In 2005, Presidential Decree No. 05/116 introduced procedures for converting former forest titles into forest concessions, signaling an attempt to reorganize and formalize forestry operations. This was followed in 2006 by specific measures concerning forestry operations and the authorization of industrial logging and the timber trade, illustrating a more targeted approach to regulating the harvesting of forest resources.

The following years saw a series of presidential decrees in 2008 specifying the procedures for classifying and declassifying forests (Decree No. 08/08) as well as the terms and conditions for granting forest concessions (Decree No. 08/09). These decrees aim to provide a more systematic framework for the allocation and management of forest resources. In 2014, a specific decree (No. 14/018) introduced the “local community forest” concessions, strengthening the decentralization of forest management and the recognition of customary rights. More recently, ministerial orders issued in 2022 addressed contemporary issues, notably the suspension of forest conservation concession contracts and the creation of the Steering Committee for the Sustainable Forest Management Program, signaling a commitment to adapting strategies to the current realities of forest management. In 2024, this framework was updated through new ministerial provisions. Finally, in 2025, a draft decree is being prepared to harmonize the forestry framework in response to illicit trafficking, an issue of growing concern. This legislative evolution from a general framework to more specific and responsive measures demonstrates the DRC’s commitment to regulating and protecting its forest resources, although challenges remain in the effective implementation of these laws, particularly regarding the fight against illegal logging and the participation of local communities.

With regard to the mining sector, through the decree of December 16, 1910 amended in 1919, the Government of the Belgian Congo had regulated mineral exploration and mining in Katanga. This regime was replaced by the decree of September 24, 1937, which was extended to the entire territory. This decree remained in force until Ordinance-Law No. 67/231 of May 3, 1967, establishing general legislation on mines and hydrocarbons, which was itself replaced by Ordinance-Law No. 81-013 of April 2, 1981, also applicable to both sectors. In response to the limitations of these frameworks and their minimal impact on public finances, Law No. 007/2002 of July 11, 2002 (Mining Code) and Decree No. 038/2003 (Mining Regulations) were adopted. These texts, supplemented by various ministerial orders, now govern the mining sector.

In 2011, Law No. 11/009 of July 9 introduced key environmental principles applicable to all activities, including mining ones: the polluter-pays principle, risk assessment and public participation. It reinforces the framework of the Mining Code. Decree No. 18/24 of June 8, 2018, amends the 2002 decree by detailing environmental requirements through several annexes (reclamation, environmental management, mitigation plans, impact studies, and site closure). Orders No. 275/2020 and No. 316/2021 establish the standards to be met. To strengthen economic sovereignty and improve the distribution of mining revenues, Law No. 18/001 of March 9, 2018, revises the 2002 Mining Code, notably by increasing royalties.

Despite the sector’s growth, local communities benefit little from the wealth it generates. To correct this imbalance, a Procedures Manual has, since 2018, governed the management of the mandatory allocation of 0.3% of the turnover earmarked for community projects. Its management is entrusted to a dedicated legal entity, supported by regulations issued by the Ministry of Mines and the Technical Unit for Mining Coordination and Planning. A comparison of popular perceptions with official political discourse on environmental issues in the DRC’s mining areas reveals a persistent tension between promises of development and the reality experienced by local communities, despite the fact that the relevant legal instruments have been revised numerous times.

In Katanga particularly in Haut-Katanga and Lualaba provinces, communities view mining as a potential driver of economic development, much like during the Gécamines era, which was described as “djo baba, djo mama” (meaning “it is the father” and “it is the mother”), a true pillar of the national economy. However, this post-Gécamines “mining boom” has been accompanied by environmental degradation affecting food security, water resources, and land. Political rhetoric promises infrastructure and prosperity, but on the ground, unfulfilled promises reinforce a sense of betrayal and collective disillusionment. The notion of the “resource curse” has taken hold in the local imagination, where Chinese and multinational companies are perceived as predators. Thus, despite institutional advances in environmental protection, implementation remains inadequate. The population continues to hope that natural resources will one day benefit local communities, even though current governance remains very limited and leaves much to be desired.

As with the mining sector, the legislative framework for hydrocarbons has undergone several reforms. Officially, these reforms were intended to enhance transparency, attract investment, and ensure more effective resource management. The current legal framework is Law No. 15/012 of August 1, 2015, supplemented by Decree No. 16/010 of April 19, 2016, which replaced the 1981 legislation that had previously governed both the mining and hydrocarbons sectors. This new framework establishes rules governing exploration, exploitation, production sharing, and applicable taxation, while also establishing a state-owned enterprise, SONAHYDRO. It introduces obligations regarding contractual transparency, national participation through local content requirements, and a more rigorous environmental regulatory framework. It also reaffirms state ownership of resources and technical data, enshrines the state’s ownership of hydrocarbons until their export, encourages the transfer of skills to Congolese nationals, and provides for a fund for future generations financed by a portion of the state’s oil revenues. Preliminary environmental and social impact assessments are now required for projects.

Despite these advances, limitations remain, notably in the narrow definition of the term “hydrocarbons,” the inadequate duration of the exploration phases, the replacement of the concession agreement with a production-sharing contract, and the direct allocation of rights to the national company. Several decrees and implementing orders specify the procedures for granting permits, technical standards, and economic conditions in the sector. Since 2022, a reform process has been under discussion to better integrate energy transition issues, strengthen the fight against corruption, and improve the redistribution of revenues from hydrocarbon exploitation. A prime example of the persistent tensions surrounding hydrocarbon governance is the tender process launched for 27 and later expanded to 52 oil and gas blocks, which sparked significant environmental and social controversies, particularly in highly sensitive ecosystems such as Virunga National Park, the Central Basin, and Lake Albert. This initiative appears to contradict the \$500 million financing agreement reached at COP26 for the preservation of the Congolese forests, and comes amid a context marked by recurring irregularities in the procedures for granting rights, which often fall short of current legal standards. In response, a petition signed by 100,000 citizens was sent in 2022 to President Félix Tshisekedi, calling for the suspension of the oil and gas projects in question.

With regard to the water sector, the DRC has long suffered from a fragmented and inadequate legal framework for water management. It was only with the adoption of the Water Code (Law No. 15/026 of December 31, 2015) that the foundations were laid for an integrated approach, aimed at ensuring access to drinking water, preserving aquatic ecosystems, and combating pollution. This legislation consolidated a series of earlier initiatives, notably the National Water Policy (2009), the IWRM Strategy (2012), and the National Water and Sanitation Action Plan (PAN-EHA, 2015–2030), which calls for increasing access to water from 33% to 80% by 2030.

Despite these ambitions, the obstacles to implementation remain considerable: limited resources, institutional weaknesses, and overlapping jurisdictions. While targeted investments have been made with support from international donors (the World Bank, UNICEF, AFD, USAID)—particularly in urban areas such as Kinshasa, Goma, and Lubumbashi, or as part of community-based WASH programs many projects remain unfinished due to a lack of sustainable funding.

Water management also transcends national borders. The DRC is involved in regional cooperation frameworks such as CICOS (Congo-Oubangui-Sangha) and the Nile Basin Initiative (NBI), which aim to promote coordinated management of water resources. However, some initiatives are controversial, such as the “Transaqua” project, which proposes transferring water from the Ubangi River to Lake Chad. This project, criticized by Congolese authorities for lacking an environmental impact assessment, threatens a sensitive watershed covered by carbon-rich tropical peatlands and already affected by the impacts of climate change .

With regard to energy, since 2007, several regulatory texts have been adopted to govern the energy sector, with the goal of improving access to energy throughout the country—particularly in rural areas while harnessing the country’s renewable energy potential (hydroelectricity, solar, and biomass). The National Climate Change Adaptation Plan (2022–2026) identifies this sector as a key driver of adaptation by promoting the transition to clean energy sources to strengthen climate resilience. As part of its international commitments, the DRC intends to maintain the share of renewable energy at 95% of the energy mix and double its production capacity by 2030, notably by reducing dependence on wood fuel, a major driver of deforestation .

Despite its enormous hydroelectric potential, the DRC has only 2,980.7 MW of theoretical installed capacity. Several power plants listed by the Electricity Regulatory Authority (ARE) are either shut down or operating below their installed capacity due to a lack of investment in maintenance and modernization . In 2021, SNEL was able to make only 68% of its generation fleet’s capacity available to its customers, with the remainder awaiting rehabilitation. The installed generation capacity represents only a tiny fraction of the hydroelectric potential, estimated at over 100,000 megawatts (MW), of which more than 44,000 are concentrated at the Inga site alone, while 890 other sites have been identified and listed in the Renewable Energy Atlas for hydroelectric projects, including pico, micro, and mini-hydropower facilities. Installed capacity is divided among SNEL (85.5%), private producers (11.9%), and other public producers (2.6%).

According to the ARE, the DRC produced 15,287 GWh of electricity in 2022, representing a 22.6% increase compared to 2020. Despite this steady increase since 2020, total annual production remains capped at 16 TWh, well below demand, which is estimated at 81 TWh . The gap between supply and demand keeps electricity indicators at low levels. The geographic coverage rate (the proportion of the population living in electrified areas relative to the total population of the region) is estimated at 36%, while the service coverage rate (the ratio of the population with actual access to the service to the population of electrified areas) is capped at 18.6%. The access rate which measures the ratio of the population with access to electricity to the total population is very low: 6.67% in 2022. Disparities between urban and rural areas are very high. According to the results of the EGI-ODD survey , 47.2% of urban households are connected to the power grid, compared to only 2.0% in rural areas. In several provinces across the country, electricity is an extremely scarce resource. In urban areas where it is available, the quality has deteriorated over the years due to a lack of investment in the renewal and maintenance of generation, transmission, and distribution infrastructure.



05.3 Conclusion

Despite its immense ecological wealth, the DRC struggles to reconcile economic development with environmental protection. The dominant model remains based on the intensive extraction of natural resources minerals, timber, and land, a model that generates revenue but does not challenge practices that are destructive to ecosystems. This extractivist approach continues to shape the country's economy without offering sustainable prospects for its people.

Initiatives do exist, however: agroforestry, ecotourism, sustainable fishing, and reforestation projects. They demonstrate a willingness to address environmental challenges. But these actions often remain isolated and technical. They improve certain practices without fundamentally transforming the rules of the game, institutions, or power dynamics. They do not constitute a genuine alternative to the extractivist model. Furthermore, even when environmental laws are ambitious on paper, their enforcement is hampered by state weakness, corruption, and conflicts of interest. The law exists, but it rarely protects forests, rivers, and communities.

Another major problem is the tendency to reduce nature to a mere market value. Forests, rivers, and biodiversity are viewed primarily as “services” that can be monetized. This perspective overlooks their cultural, spiritual, and social dimensions. It marginalizes local communities, particularly women and Indigenous peoples who are, in fact, the primary guardians of these territories. Excluded from decision-making, these communities suffer the consequences of environmental degradation without being able to influence the choices that shape their future.

In this context, multinational corporations and certain local elites play a central role. They dominate resource extraction and exert significant influence over public policy. Mining is presented as a path to development, but it rarely benefits local communities, who see their lands polluted, their rivers contaminated, and their food security threatened. This situation fuels the notion of a “resource curse.”

Finally, the DRC faces intense international pressure. Although it participates in global debates on the ecological transition, global economic interests weigh heavily on its decisions.

These limitations show that the transition cannot be reduced to technical projects or general rhetoric. The following section will explain why it is essential to amplify the voices of local communities and Indigenous peoples, and to redefine environmental justice which has become a catch-all concept as a concrete struggle for decision-making power, dignity, and the protection of living conditions.

Amplifying the voices of communities based on realities on the ground



This point raises a simple yet crucial question: to whom does the ecological transition in the DRC belong? Miss Margo's statement, "The forest is ours..."—summarizes a deep-seated unease: communities are still being asked to "participate" in the conservation of environments that are, first and foremost, their living spaces, even as decisions are all too often made without them. Yet, despite the abundance of laws and policies, concrete results remain limited: forests are shrinking, rivers are deteriorating, soils are becoming depleted, biodiversity is declining, and local populations are bearing the brunt of climate shocks. The following pages therefore begin with an observation: the transition, as it is generally conceived, remains too technocratic and too economically focused. It speaks of "ecosystem services," efficiency, financing, and "green" projects, but struggles to address the essential questions: who decides, who gains, who loses, and whose life is transformed? Through a critical analysis of dominant frameworks and the lessons drawn from our case studies, we show that environmental justice cannot be merely a slogan. It must become a practice: listening, acknowledging, sharing, making amends, and above all, empowering local communities.

06.1

Why amplify the voices of communities?



« The forest is ours—why must we still be asked to participate in the process of its conservation, when it belongs to us?» (Ms. Margo, from the community forestry program)

Nous l'avons vu, malgré l'existence en RDC d'un grand nombre de lois, de politiques et d'instruments. As we have seen, despite the existence in the DRC of a large number of laws, policies, and instruments dedicated to natural resource management, the responses to the major challenges of our time remain limited in their concrete impact. Deforestation is on the rise, rivers and soils are becoming polluted, biodiversity is declining, and local communities are bearing the brunt of the consequences of climate change. In this context, it is no longer merely the will or courage of policymakers that will determine the country's ability to address these crises. The voices of local communities must now be fully taken into account. This, of course, requires a serious fight against corruption, the promotion of good governance, and a more equitable distribution of revenues from natural resources. But it also implies something deeper: asking what an ecological transition driven by the people themselves could truly mean for the DRC.

Indeed, an analysis of Congolese political ecology shows that environmental issues and their human impacts are now widely recognized. Yet the so-called “solution country” approach remains largely insufficient to address the concrete difficulties experienced on the ground. For decades, the Congolese government's approach to environmental issues has left little room for local communities. Yet it is these communities that directly experience the impacts of environmental degradation. It is therefore essential to open up the decision-making process to

other stakeholders, particularly the affected populations.

In fact, in its efforts to address environmental degradation and its social impacts, the DRC still adheres to a traditional vision of sustainability, one that has, however, shown its limitations. This vision is based on the concept of “ecosystem services”. It views the environment through the benefits that ecosystems provide to human societies: food, water, timber, climate regulation, protection against disease, and cultural or spiritual values. This approach highlights the close links between nature and human well-being, and serves as a reminder that ecosystems are essential to life. This framework allows the DRC to recognize that ecosystems have multiple values: ecological, social, cultural, and economic. It serves as a tool for planning policies designed to reconcile biodiversity protection with development. By assigning a monetary value to these services, the government seeks to bridge the gap between economic and environmental logic, particularly through mechanisms such as payments for ecosystem services.

But this way of thinking about the environment also produces unintended consequences. By translating nature into economic values, it tends to reduce biodiversity to a commodity. It partially erases the ethical, cultural, and symbolic dimensions of ecosystems. In the discourse and practices observed in the DRC, we see a growing instrumentalization of nature, the standardization of economic assessments, and the marginalization of non-market knowledge. Forests, rivers, and land become, above all, “resources,” evaluated in terms of profitability. This logic allows economic development and environmental protection to coexist in theory. In practice, however, it often allows projects to proceed that use ecology merely as a pretext to serve growth and profit. The environment becomes just one tool among many in an economic model based on massive extraction, accumulation, and unlimited growth. This model fuels both environmental degradation and the deepening of social inequalities.

Furthermore, the DRC has committed to “green alternatives” rooted in the logic of sustainable development and green growth. These alternatives encompass technologies, practices, and models intended to reduce the ecological impact of human activities while maintaining a momentum of development. They mark a partial break with dependence on fossil fuels and with certain aspects of extractivism. They are presented as responses to the ecological crisis, seeking to promote modes of production and consumption that are more respectful of the planet’s limits. However, these alternatives quickly reveal their limitations. First, because they allow “green” initiatives to coexist alongside activities that are highly destructive to the environment. Conservation efforts are thus neutralized by the pursuit of other, equally intensive projects. Second, these alternatives often amount to ad hoc technical adjustments: cleaner technology, greater energy efficiency, or a new financial mechanism. They do not challenge the underlying structure of the economic system or the way projects are conceived from the outset. They do not bring about a simultaneous transformation of values, behaviors, and institutions. Finally, these initiatives remain trapped within the traditional logic of capitalism. They aim primarily to improve efficiency or to replace one energy source with another, without rethinking lifestyles, basic needs, or forms of production. They do not pave the way for a transformation based on moderation, cooperation, local roots, or a redefinition of what it means to “live well.” They do not offer a genuine break with a model that destroys the environment while excluding a large portion of the population.

Given these limitations, it has become essential to rethink the ecological transition based on the lived experiences of local communities. It is these communities that suffer both the degradation of their territories and the resulting social, health, and economic consequences. A truly just transition can no longer be conceived solely in terms of technology, indicators, or funding. It must be grounded in people’s concrete experiences, their knowledge, their priorities, and their ways of living in the world. It is from this foundation that environmental justice can become more than an abstract principle: a living project, rooted in local communities and driven by those who live there. That is why, in the following section, we propose drawing lessons from these on-the-ground experiences to envision the building blocks of a just transition for the DRC.

06.2

Lessons from Our Case Studies



In the areas where we conducted research with communities, the “ecological transition” is never an abstract concept. It takes tangible form in oil wells, high-voltage power lines, mining concessions, dams, nature reserves, and carbon projects. It is visible in the murky waters of rivers, in fields that no longer yield crops, in displaced villages, and in repeated promises that go unfulfilled. Everywhere, communities told us the same thing, in different words: decisions made in the name of the climate, development, or nature are transforming their lives often without their input, and sometimes against their will.

In Muanda, on the Atlantic coast, oil has been present for a long time. It is visible in the flares burning day and night, in the odors, in the soil that has become barren, and in the destroyed mangroves. Yet the city remains poor. The roads are in disrepair, the schools are inadequate, and the hospitals lack medicine. Fishermen speak of dwindling fish stocks, farmers of lost land, and women of respiratory illnesses among children. “The oil is here, but its profits are elsewhere,” they say. What is striking is not only the pollution, but the feeling of being excluded from a future that is being built on their own soil. The mechanisms supposed to redistribute revenue seem distant, opaque, and politicized. Here, the transition feels like an empty promise: extraction takes place in the name of progress, but daily life does not improve.

Further east, the Inga III dam project is being touted as a major energy solution. On paper, it’s renewable energy. On the ground, however, communities speak of uncertainty and fear. Villages are at risk of being displaced, farmland of being submerged, and rivers of being altered. The communities tell us: “This isn’t our energy.” They know that the electricity will go first to large industries and for export, while they still live without power. They remember the unfulfilled promises of Inga I and II. For them, the real question isn’t whether the energy is green, but whether it helps them live better here. The transition is beginning to look like an illusion: we’re changing the energy source, but not the way decisions are made or how costs and benefits are distributed.

In Katanga, the global transition is taking shape through strategic minerals. Cobalt, copper, and lithium are at the heart of technologies described as “green”. But in the mining villages, what people see is dust, polluted water, fields that no longer yield crops, skin diseases, and children playing near the pits. Laws exist; the texts speak of rights and protection. Yet the communities repeat: “On paper, we have rights. In reality, it’s the balance of power that decides.” Companies arrive with documents signed far from here. Communities must fight to gain access to their own land. Environmental advocates are sometimes threatened. Here, the world’s energy transition relies on an intensification of local damage. Many feel they are being sacrificed for a future that does not belong to them.

In all three of these contexts, the same disconnect emerges between rhetoric and real life. People talk about development, sustainability, and modernization, but what people see above all is the loss of their livelihoods, the deterioration of their health, and the erosion of their cultural identity. Projects are designed elsewhere and imposed on local communities as if they were a foregone conclusion. Communities are consulted too late or not at all. They become “beneficiaries,” rarely active participants capable of expressing what they want for their lands.

Yet what emerges from these discussions is not a rejection of change. Communities know that the world is changing, that the climate is shifting, and that the global economy is taking a toll on their regions. But they are asking for more than just a technical adjustment. They are asking to be able to understand, discuss, accept, or reject these changes. They are asking that their ways of living, farming, fishing, healing, and passing down traditions be taken seriously.

In the Equateur forests, the transition takes the form of carbon projects. On paper, the goal is to protect the forest by selling CO₂ credits. In the villages, however, communities first and foremost talk about their daily lives. For them, the forest isn’t an abstract resource: it’s a place where they live. They farm there, hunt there, gather medicinal plants there, and bury their dead there. Yet concessions are sometimes negotiated without their knowledge. Some discover that their forest has already been “sold” in the name of the climate. The benefits are slow to materialize. Women and young people are often absent from meetings. Tensions arise between villages. “They talk to us about protection, but they never ask us how we



want to protect our territory,” they say. They do not reject conservation. They refuse to be reduced to bit players in a transition defined elsewhere.

Around Virunga National Park, renewable energy initiatives show that another path is possible. They make it possible to generate electricity, support local activities, and reduce certain pressures on the park. Many see this as a real opportunity. But even here, the communities insist: nothing can last without dialogue. Installing turbines isn’t enough. We must discuss land, customary rights, benefit-sharing, and the role of local knowledge. “We don’t reject green energy. We want to decide with you how it should work,” they say. In a region marked by violence and poverty, the transition must be negotiated step by step. Sustainability is measured by the trust that is built, not just by the kilowatts generated.

Upemba National Park sheds yet another light on the relationship between nature and society. Here, the park is not just a space to be protected: it is the infrastructure of life. Wetlands filter water, limit flooding, and store carbon. The lakes sustain thousands of families. Timber, medicinal plants, and pastures sustain entire local economies. A large proportion of households depend directly on the park. But it is under pressure: population growth, slash-and-burn agriculture, poaching, and climate change. The question is not whether to choose between “strict conservation” and “exploitation.” It is about recognizing that the park is a living, inhabited, productive landscape. The communities know that the park’s degradation threatens their future. They also know that no solution will be sustainable without giving them a real voice in its management.

Taken together, these six cases tell the same story. Everywhere, the transition is taking different forms: oil, dams, mining, carbon, green energy, conservation. Everywhere, it is driven by rhetoric of progress. And everywhere, communities point out that the problem is not just ecological. It is also social, cultural, and political.

On the ground, the transition does not resemble a grand, coherent plan. It resembles a series of projects and regulations that keep piling up. For many, it is experienced as an external force. But it is also becoming a space for organization. In Muanda, people are documenting pollution. Around Inga, alternatives are being proposed. In Katanga, people are helping one another to survive. In Equateur, people are defending the forest as a living space. In the Virunga, initiatives are being negotiated. Around the Upemba, people are envisioning shared management.

These practices show that the transition cannot be merely a change in technology. It redefines the relationships between people, territories, and the living world. It poses a simple question: “Will this change allow us to live better here, on our land?” As long as the transition is conceived as a program to be implemented, it will breed mistrust. As long as it reduces nature to capital and communities to beneficiaries, it will perpetuate old forms of domination. But when communities can understand, discuss, decide, reject, or transform projects, the transition takes on a new face. It becomes a shared journey.

These communities have taught us that environmental justice does not arise solely from laws or markets. It arises in villages, around fields, rivers, forests, mines, and dams. It is built through community meetings, alliances, and patient negotiations. In the DRC, the transition cannot be imported. It must be invented from the ground up, with those who live there, in the language of their needs, their stories, and their hopes. Only then will it cease to be a distant concept and become a promise brought to life.

Building on these findings, the following sections outlines the key elements of a just transition in the DRC.

06.3

Toward What Kind of Environmental Justice?



Today, the term “ecological transition” is everywhere: in political discourse, donor programs, NGO projects, and corporate strategies. Yet the more widely the term is used, the more ambiguous its meaning becomes. For some, the transition is mainly about making the current system a little “cleaner”: managing forests better, reducing certain types of pollution, investing in green technologies, and creating carbon markets. For others, it requires a much more profound change: producing less, extracting fewer resources, consuming differently, and above all, transforming the power dynamics that drive the destruction of nature.

In the DRC, this ambiguity is not an abstract debate. On the ground, “transition” takes the form of decisions and projects that directly affect territories, bodies, livelihoods, and sometimes even sacred sites. Our research, based on six case studies (carbon, oil, dams, minerals, Virunga, Upemba), illustrates a simple idea: a just transition cannot be reduced to compensation, indicators, or development commitments. It depends first and foremost on the actual role given to local communities not merely as “participants,” but as actors capable of determining what is just, what is acceptable, and what must be rejected.

To understand why, we must recall how environmental justice has evolved. Initially, the focus was primarily on distribution: who benefits from resources and who bears the burdens? Then, the emphasis shifted

to procedures: who decides, who is consulted, and who is excluded? Later, it became clearer that injustice also stems from a lack of recognition of Indigenous peoples, rural communities, and women, whose knowledge and worldviews are ignored. Finally, decolonial approaches have highlighted a deeper dimension: so-called “green” policies can reproduce old ways of thinking, in which decisions made elsewhere are imposed on territories treated as reservoirs of resources (minerals, land, forests, carbon).

This is exactly what several situations in the DRC reveal. In carbon projects, the forest is often viewed as a CO₂ reservoir to be protected and sold. On paper, the goal may seem positive. But in many forest villages, problems arise when contracts are negotiated far from the communities, when information flows poorly, when benefits remain invisible, and when imposed rules disrupt vital practices: fishing, farming, hunting, gathering medicinal plants, and accessing ritual spaces. Many communities put it simply: the forest is, first and foremost, a place to live. Protecting it without recognizing the authority of those who live there can become a new form of dispossession, even if the language used is “climate” and “green.”

In Muanda, oil extraction reveals another aspect of injustice: the unfulfilled promise of development. Communities report lost land, depleted fishing grounds, pollution and disease, while poverty persists. The heart of the problem is not merely “how much” the population receives. It is the feeling of being excluded from a future built on one’s own land. When redistribution mechanisms appear to lack transparency, when decisions are politicized, when the damage accumulates, Even when presented in terms of growth or modernization, the transition can appear more like an narrative than a lived reality. The Inga III Dam and the strategic minerals extraction in Katanga shed light on an even more sensitive issue: the global energy transition can become a new source of injustice. These projects are portrayed as essential to producing “clean” electricity and supporting the deployment green technologies. Yet, on the ground, communities describe a different reality: displacement, uncertainty, threatened land, altered rivers, pollution, deteriorating health and children exposed to risk. An energy project may be technically renewable but nevertheless unjust if it is implemented without adequate consideration of social impacts or an equitable distribution of costs and benefits.

The Virunga National Park demonstrates the potential more promising approaches, particularly those centered on renewable energy and economic revitalization initiatives. But even there, however, everything depends on governance. Communities are not asking for everything to stop. They are asking that it be done in partnership with them: discussion of the rules, recognition of customary rights, clear sharing of benefits, respect for local practices, and consideration of vulnerabilities. Without this, even a “green” project can be perceived as fragile, dependent on external funding, and ultimately imposed.

Finally, the case of Upemba reminds us of something essential: nature is not just a space to be “protected”; it is the very infrastructure that sustains life. Wetlands, lakes, forests, and fertile soils sustain water, food, health, entire local economies, and even a measure of climate stability. Conservation conceived as a fortress decided from above and enforced as a ban can fail because it ignores the fact that these landscapes are inhabited, worked, frequented, and passed down through generations. Protecting the Upemba sustainably means starting with reality: who depends on what, which practices can be strengthened, what local rules exist, what risks threaten the territory, and how can we build rules that hold because they are understood and supported locally?

Ultimately, three lessons emerge from these cases. The first is that a just transition requires genuine and comprehensive environmental justice not just compensation or redistribution. Communities also expect redress for damages, health protection, food security, and clear, verifiable benefits. But above all, they demand recognition: of their knowledge, their ties to the land, their sacred sites, and their ways of life. Without recognition, the transition becomes a matter of numbers, contracts, and reports and it loses its legitimacy.

Second, the transition must start at the territories. It cannot be defined solely in Kinshasa, in foreign capitals, or in experts’ offices. Every place has its own history, conflicts, customary rules, dependencies, and vulnerabilities. Muanda is not Equateur. The Upemba is not the Virunga. Starting from the local territories means making projects transparent, securing land rights, respecting consent, building shared governance, and accepting that solutions must be tailored to local realities. The third point is that injustice is no accident: it stems from power dynamics. Global markets, powerful corporations, national and

international interests, local elites, security apparatuses, and legal frameworks that are circumvented. In this context, a just transition does not move forward solely through “good projects,” but also through the ability of communities and their allies to organize: to educate themselves, document issues, make demands, negotiate, build coalitions, and bring the voices of local communities to the places where decisions are made. The law can help, but it never provides automatic protection: it becomes a reality only when it is defended and enforced.

Rethinking a just transition in the DRC, therefore, means changing our perspective. It is no longer about asking communities to “adapt” to models designed elsewhere. It is about starting from what they experience, what they know, what they are already protecting, and what they are demanding: concrete dignity, real power over their territories, and the ability to decide the future being built on their land. Only then will “transition” cease to be a buzzword and become a credible promise for those who live, day in and day out, in close proximity to forests, rivers, fields, mines, and parks.

06.4

Conclusion

What these three sections demonstrate is that the ecological transition in the DRC does not lack ideas, legislation, or projects: above all, it lacks social and political anchoring. As long as the transition is conceived as a series of technical measures carbon markets, “green growth,” mega-infrastructure projects, administrative reforms, it will continue to produce the same fragility: public commitments, limited impact, and enduring mistrust at the local level. Laws exist, but they carry little weight when corruption, lack of transparency, conflicts of interest, and power dynamics dictate the distribution of benefits and harms.

Lessons from the case studies are clear. Everywhere, the transition takes shape in concrete projects: oil, dams, mines, parks, carbon, and “green” energy. Everywhere, communities describe the same disconnect between rhetoric and real life: persistent pollution, degraded land, displacement, threatened livelihoods, and redistribution promises that are rarely fulfilled. The problem is therefore not merely “ecological.” It is also social, cultural, and political: it concerns the way decisions are made, how compensation is provided, how resources are distributed, and how people living in these territories are recognized or ignored.

This is where environmental justice regains its meaning: it cannot be reduced to mere financial compensation or formal consultation. It entails three inseparable requirements. First, distributive justice: real access to water, land, forests, and energy, along with tangible, verifiable benefits. Second, participatory justice: genuine decision-making power at the outset of projects, not merely belated approval. Finally, justice through recognition: acknowledging local knowledge, ties to place, cultural and sacred spaces, and nature as a living world not merely as a quantifiable resource.

In other words, the transition can only become credible under one condition: we must stop asking communities to adapt to models designed elsewhere, and instead start by building on what they experience, know, and demand. It is precisely this shift from a “project to be implemented” to a “transformation to be co-created” that paves the way for a coherent agenda. That is why the following section explores a crucial question: why and how to amplify the voices of local communities and Indigenous peoples, so that the transition ceases to be a catch-all term and becomes a lived, just, and sustainable promise.

07

Agenda for a just transition in the drc :

Conclusions and recommendations

The analysis above makes clear that the ecological transition in the DRC is neither a matter of a technical adjustment nor as a question of replicating models developed elsewhere. It entails a profound transformation of the relationships between societies, territories, and living beings. The preceding analyses demonstrate that this transition can only be just if it breaks with the top-down, extractivist, and depoliticized approaches that dominate today. Three fundamental requirements therefore emerge: placing the knowledge and experiences of communities at the heart of ecological action; grounding environmental justice in local contexts by linking it to struggles for land, water, and dignity; and embracing the political dimension of any transition as a process of conflict, autonomy, and collective emancipation.

07.1

Knowledge and Local Context of Environmental Justice



An ecological transition can only be just if it begins in the territories scarred by the Anthropocene. It is rural, forest, riverside, and mining communities, those who experience ecological collapse firsthand who must be its primary agents. Refocusing the transition on these communities means breaking with the notion that solutions come from above, from international institutions, experts, or markets. This implies abandoning technocratic approaches and standardized schemes such as certain carbon projects, mega-dams, or imported large-scale climate programs in favor of responses that are rooted in local contexts, modest in scale, tailored to specific regions, and co-created based on concrete practices.

Communities possess place-based knowledge: they understand water cycles, soils, forests, seasons, and species. They often maintain spiritual, emotional, and moral relationships with nature. These local ontologies, these ways of understanding the world do not view nature as a stockpile of resources, but as a living whole with which one must coexist. Environmental justice requires fully recognizing these visions, these memories, and these connections. It calls for building a relational ecology grounded in care, coexistence, and responsibility, rather than in extraction and abstract planning.

This requires us to move away from imported, one-size-fits-all solutions and to truly listen to the communities on the ground. The legitimacy of any transformation depends on this listening. A transition that ignores the realities faced by communities is doomed to fail, as it reproduces the very violence it claims to remedy. Refocusing the transition on communities does not mean slowing down change: it means giving it a social, moral, and political foundation without which no sustainability is possible.

Concrete implications:



Explicitly enshrine territorial sovereignty and free, prior, and informed consent (reformed CLIP) at the heart of public policies for any extractive, energy, or climate-related project.



Create local decision-making bodies with effective power including the right to veto for any project affecting land, forests, or water.



Give substance to genuine ecological decentralization by providing provinces and territorial entities with the legal, technical, and financial resources necessary to develop their own just transition pathways.



Make decentralized solutions (community solar, micro-hydroelectricity, local biomass) public priorities, as alternatives to megaprojects with a heavy social and ecological footprint.



Train government agencies, donors, and operators to work with local knowledge, integrating it into policy assessments, planning, and evaluation, rather than bypassing it.



Fund ecological assessments produced by the communities themselves, based on their own criteria of value, risk, and sustainability.



Give priority support to programs designed at the local level (agroecology, sustainable fishing, community forests, water management) rather than standardized, imported models.

07.2

Territorialité et luttes

Environmental justice cannot exist without a genuine reclaiming of territories. It is not merely a matter of protecting nature, but of defending living spaces. Land, water, forests, rivers, the sea: these environments are inhabited political spaces, imbued with memory, social relationships, and cultural significance. A just transition requires supporting struggles for access to and control over these territories not as resources to be exploited, but as worlds to be inhabited.

Asserting the ecological sovereignty of communities means breaking with the neocolonial and neoliberal appropriation of resources. This does not mean authoritarian centralization, but rather returning decision-making power to the territories. Such an approach involves rethinking value chains: processing resources locally, creating sustainable jobs, reducing dependence on raw material exports, and moving beyond the fossil fuel and mining

industries as the sole economic horizon. A just transition is not just about energy; it is a transformation of the relationships between the economy, the land, and life.

This process must also be part of a dynamic of historical reparations. Communities have paid the price for colonization, postcolonial extractivism, dams, mines, and exclusionary protected areas. They bear an immense ecological and social debt. Environmental justice demands that we acknowledge these acts of violence and create mechanisms for redress for the victims: displaced farmers, fishermen deprived of water, communities living with pollution, and marginalized Indigenous peoples. The transition cannot be conceived without memory. It must take stock of the losses material, cultural, and spiritual and recognize that certain wounds cannot be healed by mere financial compensation.

To make the just transition territorial means accepting that solutions are not universal. Standardized environmental policies fail when they ignore local land uses, existing land conflicts, social relations, and the ecological constraints specific to each territory. Even projects presented as “green” can then produce destructive effects: forced displacement, loss of livelihoods, and increased tensions. The local level is not a retreat; it is the scale at which real compromises are forged and where the everyday practices of protecting the living world are carried out.

Concrete implications :



Thoroughly reform land law and the use of land, forests, water, and agriculture to guarantee genuine autonomy for communities and Indigenous peoples over their territories.



Accelerate the effective implementation of community forestry, locally managed protected areas, and the Indigenous Peoples Act (2022), to enable truly self-determined development.



Put a stop to new oil and gas projects in sensitive ecosystems, review existing concessions, and establish accessible and transparent avenues for redress for affected communities.



Permanently extend the moratorium on forestry concessions and strictly regulate carbon projects, ensuring community rights, contractual transparency, and compliance with national law.



Create ecological restoration funds in areas affected by extraction, dams, and pollution, in order to restore ecosystems and support local economic alternatives.



Require multinational corporations to implement binding accountability mechanisms: independent audits, obligations to provide restitution, and effective sanctions in the event of violations.



Support the local processing of resources and the development of regional economic sectors to break away from the logic of raw material exports.



Incorporate the memory of environmental violence into public policy by creating local ecological truth commissions capable of acknowledging the harm suffered and establishing sustainable reparations.

07.3

Politicization and Empowerment



A just transition is, by its very nature, a political process. Rights have never provided protection on their own: they acquire real significance only when they are won, defended, and contested. A transition limited to the formal granting of environmental rights or to legal reforms without social roots would remain fragile and easily reversible. Environmental justice cannot, therefore, be conceived of as a mere moral supplement to existing policies; it must break with a technocratic vision that neutralizes conflict and reduces ecology to a management issue.

Recognizing conflict as the matrix of law means accepting that local struggles are not disturbances to be contained, but the very engine of transformation. In the DRC, communities are already mobilizing to defend their lands, rivers, forests, and livelihoods against extractive projects whether fossil fuel-based or marketed as “green.” These struggles serve as a reminder that the transition cannot be separated from power dynamics, structural inequalities, and colonial legacies. Granting rights is necessary but insufficient: history shows that the law can be stripped of its substance if it is not supported by collective dynamics capable of transforming the balance of power.

In this context, the narrative that portrays the DRC as a “solution country” must be questioned. Used without checks and balances, it transforms Congolese biodiversity and resources into global capital, serving the transition of others while disregarding local suffering. The transition must not be conceived as a smooth adaptation to a destructive system, but as a political break with the logic of accumulation and dispossession. It must build on the resistance already underway: reinvented agricultural practices, customary forest protections, local solidarity, care economies, and forms of infrapolitics that keep alive alternative ways of inhabiting the world.

A just transition is rooted in a living fabric of struggles, alliances, and knowledge. It is driven by grassroots coalitions women, farmers, fishermen, young people, Indigenous peoples, and engaged researchers that are autonomous and capable of resisting co-optation by technocrats and NGOs. Redefining political ecology means making ecology a practice of connection and care, and environmental justice both a method and an end: the collective capacity to “make a different world” alongside the living world.

Concrete implications :



Guarantee financial, legal, and security support for independent community organizations and environmental defenders to ensure their autonomy and capacity for sustainable action.



Build lasting alliances between NGOs, researchers, and communities to document environmental injustices and develop advocacy based on lived experiences.



Repoliticize the “solution country” label by transforming it into a lever for social and territorial demands, serving Congolese aspirations rather than serving as an instrument of technocratic legitimization.



Establish permanent forums for community consultation on land use, extractive industries, and climate projects, in order to put communities back at the center of the decisions that affect them.



Provide direct technical and legal support to communities to enable them to assess risks, negotiate, secure their rights, and make informed collective decisions.



Establish national frameworks for coordinating environmental struggles, capable of linking local dynamics and exerting influence in political arenas.



Integrate social movements into environmental governance as full-fledged actors, moving beyond the logic of formal consultation.



Strengthen legal protections for environmental defenders against threats, abusive prosecutions, and violence.



Encourage alliances between communities, researchers, and cultural actors to produce alternative narratives of the transition, rooted in local territories, memories, and struggles.

These conclusions and their implications call for broadening the discussion around four transformation axes, which are therefore proposed based on these findings :

The first is to redefine Congolese political ecology from the ground up. The designation of “solution country” must be rooted in local realities. Environmental policies must be based on the needs, interests, and knowledge of local populations. A “bottom-up” approach must become the norm.

The second area aims to bring together existing initiatives for a just transition. Political ecology is a space of struggle. We must strengthen the movements that amplify these voices by grounding them in the realities of Indigenous peoples and local communities, in order to transform demands into concrete political actions.

The third pillar proposes creating a clear inventory of local demands. This involves identifying, documenting, and disseminating the communities' demands in order to present them in a coherent manner to Congolese authorities and international partners.

The fourth priority calls for strengthening advocacy on challenges that have already been identified: destruction of territories, pollution, health impacts, and forced displacement. These problems are well known; the task now is to address them through concrete, binding, and verifiable reforms.

Ultimately, these various demands and priorities point to a single imperative: the ecological transition in the DRC cannot be imposed, standardized, or depoliticized. It must begin in the wounded territories, recognize local knowledge, redress historical injustices, and draw strength from ongoing struggles. It is not merely a matter of changing technologies or indicators, but of profoundly transforming the relationships between human societies, territories, and the natural world. Making the DRC a true “solution country” does not mean offering its forests, rivers, and minerals to the planet without anything in return. It means building, together with Indigenous peoples and local communities, a political ecology capable of ensuring equitable access to ecosystem services, the local redistribution of benefits, genuine participation in decision-making, and the full recognition of local knowledge and ontologies. Environmental justice is not merely an optional consideration: it is the very condition of all sustainability. Without it, the transition will remain an empty phrase, a source of new forms of violence. With it, the transition can become a path toward collective emancipation, restored dignity, and the rebuilding of relationships between humans and non-humans. Only then will the ecological transition in the DRC cease to be something imposed upon the people and become a future they have chosen for themselves.



Contact



E-mails

corapreforme2014@gmail.com

contact@notreterresanspetrole.org

info@rainforestuk.org



Website

www.coraprdc.org

www.notreterresanspetrole.org

www.rainforestfoundationuk.org



Téléphones

+243 811 697 699

+243 847 409 962

+243 979 672 109



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PAPER**

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and Indigenous Peoples*

September 2026