



## Indigenous peoples in the DRC need our support to save the forest

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A local farmer is seen as he works in his field near the village of Lokolama in the Democratic Republic of the Congo in October of 2017 [Kevin McElvaney/Greenpeace]

To get to the village of Lokolama, in the Equateur province of the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), one must catch a plane from the capital Kinshasa to the city of Mbandaka and then drive for hours on bumpy roads into the dense rainforest of the Congo Basin. The village has 510 inhabitants who have maintained their traditional lifestyle for generations.

The remoteness and inherent calm of the village can lead one to assume it has been easy for members of the Indigenous community living there to hold on to their traditional way of living. Unfortunately, this has not been the case. For decades, the inhabitants of Lokolama, like many other Indigenous communities in the DRC, have been forced to live with the permanent fear of losing their forest - their precious home - to logging corporations.

During colonial rule, and even after independence, governments in central Africa have acted as if the only path to development in the region was through felling trees on an industrial scale. Successive governments in the DRC followed a similar strategy. The country's first "forest code", accepted in 1941, for example, allowed for forest concessions to be given exclusively to logging corporations, negating the rights of Indigenous peoples on their ancestral lands.

The state's persistent pro-corporate and anti-community approach to forest management - coupled with decades of political instability, civil war and a consequent culture of corruption and impunity - resulted in forest-dependent Indigenous communities being forced to live in a state of constant uncertainty and fear.

Something changed in 2002. Following decades of relentless campaigning by Indigenous communities and environmental activists, the DRC government finally agreed to include in its forest code the possibility for communities to also obtain legal titles to their forestland.

It took another 17 years for an indigenous community to obtain a forest concession, but in March 2019, authorities finally handed the title deed for 10,000 hectares of forests surrounding the village of Lokolama to the local chief, Joseph Bonkile.

Encouraged by their monumental legal victory, which made them the first Indigenous community in the DRC to receive a forest concession from the state, the locals swiftly started working on a plan to efficiently manage their lands.

Acknowledging the size of the task at hand, Chief Bonkile and Valentin Engobom, the president of the management committee of the forest concession for the village, asked Greenpeace and local organisations for guidance in coming up with ways to generate income while protecting the forest. With financial and organisational support from these environmental groups, they conducted a biodiversity survey to identify any features of particular conservation importance in their forest. They also recently completed a simple management plan for their forest, and are now awaiting approval from the state.

While the community made considerable progress in achieving their goals in a short period of time, the past few months have been tough. Though no one among the Indigenous people living in the village has tested positive for COVID-19 so far, the coronavirus pandemic had a significant negative impact on their lives and forest management plans. Transport disruptions made it difficult for Indigenous communities to access basic necessities. Moreover, due to the economic crisis triggered by the pandemic, financing for their plans to sustainably develop their forest lands also became hard to get.

The people of Lokolama need extensive financial support to implement a successful system of community forest management and meet the legal requirements that come with holding the deeds for extensive forest lands. Raising money for such a cause, in the DRC and internationally, is significantly harder now due to the pandemic and the consequent economic crash.

But these new challenges did not cause community members to lose hope and give up on their dreams to set up a system that would benefit locals while protecting the environment. After all, for years they have faced any obstacle and adversity with the optimistic motto of "yes, we can".

"We have spent about three months to explore the richness of our forest. Each of us used our specific knowledge ... We have identified what we will do and not in our concession that benefits all, making gains without destroying our forest and compromising the future of our children ... We are ready ... The COVID-19 pandemic disrupted our program, but it's a question of time", Engobo told me.

For decades, destructive policies that prioritise development and profit above everything else guided the management of the world's second-largest rainforest in the Congo Basin. These policies not only trashed forest lands that are crucial for the long-term survival of humanity, but also caused large-scale displacement and persistent abuse of Indigenous peoples living there.

Countless reports by civil society organisations, including Greenpeace Africa, have captured the systemic human rights violations faced by peoples who have lived in the forest for centuries, sometimes millennia.

Indigenous peoples are the ideal forest guardians. Research shows that they achieve conservation results at least equal to those of government-run protected areas - with a fraction of the budget. Uprooting Indigenous communities from their forest homes, therefore, leaves the forest's biodiversity and carbon stocks at higher risk.

In 2002, the DRC paved a new and promising path to genuine local development by amending its forest code to allow Indigenous peoples, such as the inhabitants of the village of Lokolama, to

manage the lands they call home. The country is now slowly turning the page on an unjust and harmful era in which Indigenous peoples had very little influence on the fate of their forests. But the fight is not yet over.

The COVID-19 pandemic, and the devastating impact it has had on the global economy, is threatening to derail the Indigenous communities' plans to sustainably and justly manage their forests. The people of Lokolama, and other Indigenous communities in the DRC who are also working to secure forest concessions, need the help of the international community more than ever.

We should not allow the pandemic to delay the essential inclusion of Indigenous peoples as equal partners in forest management.

Source: <https://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/opinion/indigenous-peoples-drc-support-save-forest-200810100748158.html>