REDD+ in DRC: Platform explores next steps for forest carbon, restoration and rights

At COP26 climate change negotiations in Glasgow last year, the role of forests in capturing and storing carbon was high on the agenda, with over 100 countries committing to reversing forest loss and degradation by 2030 – and more than $19 billion in public and private funds pledged to the cause.

Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) was one of the countries that signed up to those "audacious objectives," as they were described by Norwegian Agency for Development Cooperation (Norad) representative Ellen Henrikke Aalerud, during a science and public policy platform hosted by the Center for International Forestry Research and World Agroforestry (CIFOR-ICRAF) soon after the Glasgow summit in December.

DRC is home to 60 percent of the Congo Rainforest – the second-largest contiguous tract of tropical forest in the world – and a significant portion of the recently-discovered Cuvette Centrale peatland, which is the most extensive tropical peatland on the planet.

But deforestation rates are high – often exceeding a million hectares per year – and if left unchanged, will have major consequences for livelihoods and ecosystems both within the region and beyond.

"It is increasingly evident that the tropical forests in the Congo Basin are necessary for the continent's water cycles," said Henrikke. "Further deforestation could cause an absence of rainfall, which combined with climate change has become a major concern. The potential consequences would be limited livestock productivity, socio-political instability, and migration."

While the commitment made at COP26 is new, a range of actors at local, national and international levels have been exploring ways to protect and rehabilitate DRC's critical forest ecosystems for decades.

Since 2009, the country has been involved in the REDD+ process, a framework formed under the U.N. Framework Convention on Climate Change Conference of the Parties that seeks to reduce emissions from deforestation and forest degradation, and promote the sustainable management of forests and the conservation and enhancement of forest carbon stocks in developing countries.

"There is a pressing need for us to take action to protect our remaining forests – and the most relevant initiative to slow down deforestation in Congo is REDD+," said Faustin Boyemba, the senior programming advisor for DRC's national REDD+ fund, FONAREDD.

Alongside that process, DRC has also been involved since 2009 in CIFOR's Global Comparative Study on REDD+ (GCS-REDD+).

The project aims to inform policy makers and practitioners with information, tools and analysis to design and implement effective, efficient, and equitable policies and actions to reduce emissions from deforestation and degradation, enhance the contribution of the forestry sector in nationally determined contributions (NDCs) to the Paris Agreement on climate change, and support Indigenous and local communities' rights.

GCS-REDD+ is currently in its fourth phase, which focuses on strengthening knowledge for action to protect tropical forests and enhance rights. For the 2021-2023 period, research will focus particularly on four countries: Brazil, DRC, Indonesia and Peru.

"We chose a variety of countries, because they represent different governance regimes, forest carbon levels, and political and socio-economic contexts," said CIFOR scientist Pham Thu Thuy, who leads the CIFOR-ICRAF Climate Change, Energy and Low-Carbon Development team.

"We wanted to have a comprehensive understanding of different policies and project interventions to reduce emissions from deforestation and degradation, with a hope that our research can generate information – but also lessons learned on how policies and project can work effectively, efficiently and equitably in different governance and country contexts."

As such, the December platform sought to share, discuss, validate, and adapt to DRC, the various lines of work in the study.

One key issue for DRC context is the fact that while in many other high-deforestation countries industrial agriculture is the principal driver of deforestation, in DRC small-scale agriculture is the main contributor.

That underscores the importance of inclusive, participatory and livelihood-enhancing ways of working, as Henrikke stated: "it becomes imperative to conceive of inclusive measures which not only protect forests, but equally contribute towards improved livelihoods and in the long run improve the welfare of the people of Congo."

The sentiment was echoed by CIFOR scientist Christian Amani, who noted that "this [GCS-REDD+] project aims to launch new approaches of viewing forest-related activities… We no longer consider forests just as a natural resource; but also look at the viewpoint of the beneficiaries of the forest."

To that end, Boyemba called for more investment to be channelled to the provincial level, in order to help smallholders to boost their productivity and profitability, and in so doing create less incentive for encroachment into forests.

"We want to provide more support to farmers, and increase the processing of foodstuffs and other resources at local level, improve the business climate, and so on," he said. "There is also a need for a lead mechanism to inform people early about the risk of bushfires."

He also pointed out some of the economic possibilities for DRC of capitalizing on global transitions towards a climate-smart economy, such as providing raw materials for the manufacture of electric vehicles.

Blaise-Pascal Ntirumenyerwa Mihigo, professor of law at the [University of Kinshasa](#), delivered an in-depth presentation that scrutinized the policies and letters of intent underpinning the REDD+ rollout in DRC, and considered the kinds of policies and actions that could prove useful in the coming years – such as making project management more inclusive, and securing funds for a second implementation phase from 2026 to 2031.

CIFOR scientist Nia Atmadja, meanwhile, offered an international perspective on the nature of climate funding, and the degree of influence that can have on funding mechanisms for different countries.

Sustainable development expert Félicien Kengoum Djiegni made a presentation about the research he is currently leading on Payments for Ecosystem Services in the DRC, and discussed the use of tools such as investments and moratoriums to reduce deforestation.

A question and answer session also provided an opportunity for participants to brainstorm about further measures for reducing deforestation in the country.

CIFOR scientist Denis Sonwa summarized the workshop, highlighting some critical areas of work in the year to come.

"High-value forest, for instance, is something that has not yet been defined clearly in the documents to date," he said. "But it is very relevant, because donors are beginning to consider forest quality, and considering which forests hold more carbon and have greater reserve potential than others. So, these are some of the parameters which are going to be looked into as we begin with the next phase of our work."

Pham emphasised the importance of ongoing partnership and collaboration.

"We would like to formulate a strong international and national partnership between people who are working in DRC and at the global level," she said.

"CIFOR alone cannot solve the challenges described here, but with collaboration and building on existing knowledge – and on the networks that are already embedded in the countries and at the

global level – we can as a whole carry out collective action to support DRC in achieving its REDD+ commitments and goals."

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