



# The challenges of deforestation in the world's second largest forest in the Congo Basin



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Clara Malonga

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**Clara Malonga** was graduated in 2021 from the University of Paris 8 with a degree in Political Science. She conducts geopolitical analyses of African, South American and Asian states in order to analyze land, confessional, and inter-ethnic conflicts within various territories.

Within Werra, she is a member of the Environmental Security Committee.

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## INTRODUCTION

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*"The forest cover of the Democratic Republic of Congo has decreased from 67% to 54% of the territory between 2003 and 2018"*, according to the Ambassador of the Democratic Republic of Congo Tosi Mpanu Mpanu.

The tropical forests within the Congo Basin play a key role in the fight against climate change. The Congo Basin forest massif extends over six Central African states. The Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) has about 60% of the tropical forest within its territory. A lush forest, extending to the border countries in the east of the DRC, Uganda and Rwanda. The forest is present within neighboring states of the DRC such as the Republic of Congo, Gabon, Equatorial Guinea, Central African Republic and southern Cameroon<sup>1</sup>. From November 1<sup>er</sup> to 13, 2021 in Glasgow, Scotland, hundreds of leaders gathered for COP 26 committed to stopping deforestation by 2030.

For decades, Central African states have been struggling to combat deforestation. Before Central African states became dependent on oil exports, timber was one of the main natural resources exported by current Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC) member states such as Gabon and the Republic of Congo. Internationalization strategies have allowed foreign forestry companies to diversify the origin of the wood they import from the region. Forestry



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<sup>1</sup> Map Central African forest: what remains to be saved By Laurence Caramel, Published on 05 October 2021.” [https://www.lemonde.fr/afrique/article/2021/10/05/foret-d-afrique-centrale-ce-qu-il-reste-a-sauver\\_6097140\\_3212.html](https://www.lemonde.fr/afrique/article/2021/10/05/foret-d-afrique-centrale-ce-qu-il-reste-a-sauver_6097140_3212.html)



companies mainly from Europe and Asia. During the late 1960s and early 1970s, a particularly rapid distribution of contracts was made in Cameroon (1968-71), and Gabon (1968-72)<sup>2</sup>. Foreign logging companies benefiting from this natural wealth were able to exploit Central Africa's timber with few restrictions. However, climate change, which has been predicted for decades by scientists, hinders their logging operations. Moreover, although the African continent is not a major polluter, it is one of the continents that will probably be the most impacted and exposed to climate change. The huge carbon sinks within the swampy areas, better known as peatlands, located in northwestern DRC and eastern Republic of Congo absorb tons of carbon dioxide each year. Yet, various concessions are being granted within the peatlands for current and future industrial activities by the DRC and the Republic of Congo. However, these oil explorations, or logging operations located in peatlands, risk degrading the carbon sinks that reduce the adverse effects of climate change.

Political and economic measures to combat deforestation vary by state and demography. Gabon, with a population of 2.2 million and almost 90% forest cover, is taking considerable environmental measures to conserve its forest cover. In this article, we focus on the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), which fails to conserve most of its tropical forest, with a population of about 89 million.

Every year, the forest cover decreases despite the means established to fight deforestation. The question then arises as to whether Central African states in socio-economic crisis are able to control logging within their concessions through established forestry policies to mitigate deforestation? And can they maintain forest cover without degrading the living conditions of living beings and the environment?

This paper will demonstrate how the forestry and environmental policies adopted by Central African states are decisive. It will demonstrate that uncontrolled logging causes the degradation of the primary forest, affecting the living conditions of living beings and the environment.

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<sup>2</sup> Logging contracts on public land in the tropics, <https://www.fao.org/3/K0050F/k0050f06.htm>

## Lack of regulation within concessions increases logging and deforestation in the Congo Basin

Industrial logging by foreign logging companies in Central African concessions is contributing to the deforestation process. For decades, African governments have been facing economic instability. As a result, many governments have decided to relax legislation and tax regimes applicable to foreign logging companies. However, the lack of diversification of the economic sectors of African states has led to a dependence of states on foreign logging companies. The distribution of concessions to companies for industrial exploitation increases every year without them being really controlled by the Central African States. The certification system of the environmental label, Forest Stewardship Council "to ensure that the production of wood or a wood-based product respects the procedures guaranteeing sustainable forest management"<sup>3</sup> "has so far been little used. Indeed, the majority of forest concessions allocated by the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) "are not certified by the Forest Stewardship Council (FSC)"<sup>4</sup>.

	Concessions forestières attribuées			Concessions aménagées		Concessions certifiées (1)	
	Superficie (ha)	Nombre	Superficie moyenne (ha)	Superficie (ha)	%	Superficie (ha)	%
Cameroun	6 659 226	111	68 651	5 587 466	84	2 818 093	42
Congo	14 246 434	50	279 341	6 941 879	49	4 519 432	32
Nord-Congo	9 391 677	19	444 400	4 888 398	52	4 128 172	44
Sud-Congo	4 854 757	31	156 605	2 053 481	42	391 260	8
Gabon	14 678 909	136	107 933	7 908 711	54	2 042 616	14
Guinée Equatoriale	739 501	36	20 541	0	0	0	0
RCA	3 705 128	14	264 652	3 028 416	82	0	0
RDC	11 785 765	66	178 572	1 993 718	17	0	0
Total	51 814 963	413	153 282	32 402 069	48	9 380 141	15

<sup>3</sup> "FSC forest certification" World Wide Fund For Nature. <https://www.wwf.fr/champs-daction/foret/gestion-durable/FSC>

<sup>4</sup> FSC Congo Basin's efforts to certify 15 million hectares of forest concessions. <https://fr.fsc.org/fr-fr/newsfeed/les-efforts-de-fsc-bassin-du-congo-pour-certifier-15-millions-dhectares-de-concessions>



Source : Central African Forest Commission COMIFAC: Forestry concessions,  
[https://www.observatoire-comifac.net/monitoring\\_system/concessions](https://www.observatoire-comifac.net/monitoring_system/concessions)

Thus, a large part of the wood could be cut in an unsustainable way, and accentuate the deforestation and degradation of the primary forest despite the existence of certified concessions. In 2002, a moratorium was put in place by the DRC government to "prohibit the allocation of new logging concessions<sup>5</sup>" and protect the tropical forest from industrial exploitation. However, the lack of regulations has intensified fraud and corruption within the concessions. Indeed, three concessions were awarded in 2015 to Chinese investors for logging in the Congo Basin. The DRC's Minister of Environment and Sustainable Development (2014-2015), Bienvenu Liyota Ndjoli, "awarded three concessions covering a total of almost 650,000 ha located in the Equateur and Tshuapa provinces to Société La Millénaire Forestière SARL (SOMIFOR)<sup>6</sup>". The DRC government announced the imminent lifting of the moratorium on the awarding of new logging concessions, which had been in place since 2002. In September 2020, DRC President Felix Tshisekedi, "ordered the suspension of all dubious forest concessions, including the six granted in September 2020<sup>7</sup>". Indeed, "about 4 million 600 hectares of Congolese forest were sold fraudulently in 2020<sup>8</sup>". All of these events demonstrate that the lack of policy measures and strict regulations from Central African states is intensifying logging within demarcated concessions by increasing deforestation.

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<sup>5</sup> Central African Forest Initiative (CAFI) "27. Has the 2002 moratorium been successful?" <https://www1.undp.org/content/cafifr/home/all-news/drc-forests---frequently-asked-questions/how-successful-has-the-2002-moratorium-been--should-it-be-lifted.html>

<sup>6</sup> "Greenpeace Africa reacts after DRC President's decision to suspend illegal logging concessions taken by his former Environment Minister"

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>8</sup> "DRC: deforestation on the menu of the Council of Ministers "



## Artisanal logging by the local population to meet their needs affects the forest cover

Artisanal logging in the DRC is mainly carried out outside of forest concessions and within protected forests. This exploitation is carried out by individuals who do not hold a logging permit and who depend on the forest to meet their primary needs. The forestry sector is rife with corruption at the provincial and national levels. Since the authorities at the provincial and communal levels cannot supervise artisanal forest concessions due to a lack of financial means, a large number of artisanal loggers violate the legal laws that are supposed to fight against forest mismanagement in the DRC. Indeed, the "Law No. 011/2002 of August 29, 2002 on the Forestry Code and Law No. 11/009 of July 9, 2011 on the fundamental principles of environmental protection<sup>9</sup> " is mostly not respected by artisanal loggers. The lack of sanctions increases the chains of corruption developed between artisanal loggers and provincial authorities.

The majority of trees are cut to obtain charcoal which is then sold on the markets of the capitals of the Central African states. The lack of financial resources allocated to improve access to electricity in remote areas indirectly affects the forest and the living conditions of rural populations. Indeed, the lack of public subsidies allowing individuals to meet their primary needs, forces local populations to cut wood to burn it and obtain charcoal. Charcoal that allows the rural population to cook their food and have electricity. Since, "80% of the domestic energy of the inhabitants of the big metropolises of Central Africa is based on charcoal<sup>10</sup>". In order to obtain a considerable amount of charcoal, it takes at least "seven kilos of wood to produce one kilo of charcoal<sup>11</sup>". It must be taken into account that the majority of the wood cut in the forest is done without restriction. This is due, on the one hand, to the absence of a clear land tenure system to regulate artisanal logging. On the other hand, the lack

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<sup>9</sup> "DRC: Cases of illegality in the artisanal exploitation of wood in Kinkole " <https://infocongo.org/fr/rdc-des-cas-dillegality-dans-lexploitation-artisanale-du-bois-a-kinkole/>

<sup>10</sup> "DRC The fight against deforestation in Central Africa: a victim of political oblivion? Symphorien Ongolo, Alain Karsenty In Ecology & Politics 2011/2 (N° 42), pages 71 to 80

<sup>11</sup> The rationalization of wood energy production and consumption. Minh Cuong Le Quan, Pierre Jacquemot In Afrique contemporaine 2017/1-2 (No. 261-262), pages 246-248



of opportunities and the underdevelopment of infrastructure within the Central African States, lead to the formation of criminal networks. Artisanal logging has become the main source of income for individuals living near or in the forest. Exploitation by rural populations within protected areas accentuates deforestation, which could be mitigated by considerable policy measures established by the states of the region.

## The non-recognition by Central African governments of customary land rights accentuates the illegal exploitation of land-grabbing companies.

The virtual non-existence of customary land rights "designating the land rights that people have over the land they live on, cultivate or use in any way, according to local culture and customs"<sup>12</sup> accentuates illegal logging and deforestation. In effect, the areas taken are not recognized by the government or local communities. Thus, land inhabited by pygmies can be illegally taken over and exploited by foreign companies. Moreover, according to the DRC's Minister of the Environment, Eve Bazaiba, "timber is exploited illegally at the expense of state revenues"<sup>13</sup>. The large logging companies have considerable financial resources which they can use to buy up village land. However, the illegal purchase of land affects the forest as well as the people living in the territories exploited for their timber. The lack of recognition of land rights leads to the eviction of entire populations and the creation of illegal concessions. In addition, within the illegal concessions, various protected trees are cut down, such as the Kevazingo tree, which is prized in China for the manufacture of wooden furniture. Although its exploitation is illegal in Gabon, Kevazingo continues to be illegally exported to China. In order to reduce the illegal import of wood, the European Union has put in "force on March 3, 2013 a regulation prohibiting the import of wood and wood products"<sup>14</sup> in order to control the

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<sup>12</sup> Habitat world map "CUSTOMARY LAND LAW"

<https://habitat-worldmap.org/mots-cles/droit-foncier-coutumier/>

<sup>13</sup> Laurence Caramel, "Central African forest: what remains to be saved" Published on 05 October 2021.

<sup>14</sup> Guide to the EU Timber Regulation "The EU Timber Regulation and Voluntary Partnership Agreements: two complementary instruments to fight illegal timber and forest misgovernance"





import of wood products, but to be able to identify the suppliers. However, European regulations on protected wood do not mitigate its illegal exploitation and import into Europe. According to a study by the World Wide Fund for Nature (WWF), "about 23% of forest products imported into Europe were presumed to be of illegal origin in 2010"<sup>15</sup>. There are still important gaps to be filled by the Central African States and the European Union to ensure that the wood is not illegally exploited and that it does not multiply the phenomenon of deforestation.

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<sup>15</sup> The World Wide Fund for Nature (WWF) "Towards responsible timber sourcing". <https://www.wwf.fr/champs-daction/foret/approvisionnement-responsable/bois>



## Vulnerability of the forest, biodiversity and local populations: consequence of the quasi-impunity of logging companies and artisanal loggers

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The lack of control within the concessions increases deforestation and degrades biodiversity.

Selective logging does not conserve the biodiversity of primary forests but rather increases their degradation. Indeed, the exploitation within forest concessions leads to the disappearance of already threatened plant and animal species. The thirty or forty year tree cutting cycles are too short since trees that are hundreds or even thousands of years old, which are essential for the development of various animal species, cannot reach maturity. Thus, the deterioration of trees leads to the disappearance of species that find it difficult to adapt to their new environment. In addition, endangered and threatened animal species are continually hunted by local populations who depend on the forest to meet their primary needs. In addition, deforestation also leads to the depletion of rivers. According to Jean François Ombele, head of the forestry service at the Departmental Directorate of Forest Economy of the Pool in the Republic of Congo, "silting due to soil erosion, degrades the vegetation cover of streams, and causes their disappearance"<sup>16</sup>. The disappearance of streams affects rural populations and aquatic species. The destruction of the forest in the department of Pool, in the south of the Republic of Congo has deteriorated various streams and has affected the environment of aquatic species, which due to the deterioration of marine soils have disappeared from rivers. In 2019, more than 10,000 fires were recorded by NASA satellites in the Congo Basin. However, the causes of the fires are multiple and opposite to the fires that ravage the Amazon forest. Slash-and-burn agriculture, an ancestral practice of burning land to make it more fertile, is now particularly harmful to biodiversity in the forests. Fires are also a consequence of traditional hunting in these forests. This hunting leads individuals to burn entire savannahs to hunt game without the extent of the fire being controlled by the decentralized local

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<sup>16</sup> Congo: Deforestation is damaging the waters of the Pool Department, [Congo : La déforestation abîme les eaux du département du Pool \(infocongo.org\)](http://infocongo.org)

authorities. The negligence of local communities to manage fire aggravates deforestation and degrades biodiversity.

In the Democratic Republic of Congo, wood and charcoal sold in the capital of the country comes mainly from the Saké forest. Fires perpetrated illegally to obtain charcoal can affect areas rich in biodiversity and harm the health of rural populations because of the toxic fumes, as the combustion of harvested wood can cause "respiratory, cardiac and ocular damage"<sup>17</sup>.

## The development of roads and forestry infrastructures to import wood makes life more complex for local people living nearby

The roads built to export cut timber have consequences in areas inhabited by rural populations. When a concession is sold, it leads to the creation of roads that further destroy the forest.



"Save the forest: Tropical timber in brief"

The virtual impunity enjoyed by the multinationals responsible for environmental degradation affects the land of the populations. The States whose economy depends on the export of wood hardly sanction the forestry companies that pollute soils and rivers. Logging

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<sup>17</sup> *Opcit.* Rationalization of the production and consumption of wood energy.



pushes populations to find refuge in new territories. Central African governments are handing over various forest concessions without taking into account the claims of local communities. Like the pygmies of the North of the Republic of Congo who have been "threatened by logging and mining"<sup>18</sup>. This threat has led to the populations of the Likouala department abandoning their traditions and "losing access to their ancestral lands"<sup>19</sup>. Thus, impunity and the non-respect of customary land rights lead the populations to suffer from the impossibility of providing for their primary needs through subsistence agriculture affected by logging.

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<sup>18</sup> "Threatened, the Pygmies of Congo take refuge deep in the forest", <https://www.dw.com/fr/menac%C3%A9s-les-pygm%C3%A9s-du-congo-se-r%C3%A9fugient-au-plus-profond-de-la-for%C3%AAt/g-59836071>

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*



# The sale of concessions in complex and fragile ecosystems: risk of disruption of annual rainfall and food insecurity

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The forest absorbs large amounts of CO<sub>2</sub> emitted into the atmosphere on a global scale. It is therefore important to protect the forest in order to store carbon and prevent its release into the atmosphere because deforestation and forest degradation send billions of tons of carbon into the atmosphere every year. The peatlands located in the western part of the Democratic Republic of Congo and in the eastern part of the Republic of Congo are the largest tropical peatlands on the planet. These carbon sinks would contain more than "30 billion tons of CO<sub>2</sub>, equivalent to three years of global emissions"<sup>20</sup>. On the other hand, this swampy area attracts various companies wishing to exploit wood or explore oil deposits. For years, the governments of both Congo have granted logging and oil exploration permits to forestry and oil companies, and according to the Center for International Cooperation in Agronomic Research for Development (CIRAD), "about 4.5 million hectares, or 26% of the country's swampy areas, are entirely or partially covered by some thirty concessions"<sup>21</sup>. The deterioration of carbon sinks could have irreversible effects. According to environmental NGOs, a considerable stock released into the atmosphere could lead to a rise in temperature of 3 to 4° C on a global scale. In addition, the loss of forest cover in the Congo Basin could disrupt the high amounts of precipitation that supply water to entire regions. Indeed, according to climatologist Arona Diedhiou, director of research at the University of Grenoble, the forests of the Congo Basin "influence rainfall as far away as the Sahara, and it is estimated that they contribute to injecting into the atmosphere more than half of the annual precipitation"<sup>22</sup>. Thus, the degradation of the humid region of the Congo Basin could

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<sup>20</sup> Green Congo: Congolese peatlands, a lethal weapon (2/3), <https://www.jeuneafrique.com/1117775/societe/serie-green-congo-3-3-les-tourbieres-congolaises-une-arme-fatale/>

<sup>21</sup> Are logging concessions threatening peatlands in the Democratic Republic of Congo?, <https://ur-forets-societes.cirad.fr/actualites/les-concessions-d-exploitation-forestiere-menacent-elles-les-tourbieres-en-republique-democratique-du-congo>

<sup>22</sup> Central African forest: what remains to be saved, [https://www.lemonde.fr/afrique/article/2021/10/05/foret-d-afrique-centrale-ce-qu-il-reste-a-sauver\\_6097140\\_3212.html](https://www.lemonde.fr/afrique/article/2021/10/05/foret-d-afrique-centrale-ce-qu-il-reste-a-sauver_6097140_3212.html)



destabilize agricultural production in the Sahel up to eastern Ethiopia. Given that weather conditions have led to major losses in agricultural production in sub-Saharan Africa, it is more than necessary to effectively combat deforestation.

## Deforestation can lead to the displacement of populations and increase food insecurity

The first victims of deforestation are the populations that depend on the resources coming from the forest. Deforestation contributes strongly to soil erosion and leads to the disappearance of animal species consumed by local populations who depend on the forest ecosystem to meet their primary needs. However, spontaneous and forced movements of populations within new territories do not guarantee food security, and migration can lead to a multitude of land disputes that can be aggravated by inter-ethnic and confessional conflicts. Violent conflicts, of which food insecurity is the main cause affecting the stability of a territory. Indeed, conflicts can destabilize the infrastructures that are essential to the growth of the economy and to food security. Increased scarcity, lack of food, and the disappearance of sacred plants and medicinal essences deteriorate the health and living conditions of populations. The disruption of rainfall could have a strong impact on agriculture and lead to the disappearance of livestock and agricultural production. Diseases related to malnutrition could increase, such as kwashiorkor, which is a disease affecting mainly young children due to a serious lack of protein.



## CONCLUSION

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Ultimately, the deforestation of the second largest forest in the world after the Amazon is the result of several factors. However, the absence of forestry and environmental policies to combat the loss of forest cover accentuates deforestation and degrades the living conditions of all living beings within the forest. Central African states have considerable power and can, through their political decisions, protect the forest and the rural populations living there. The lack of control within the concessions ceded to national and foreign logging companies does not allow for forest conservation. Although logging is delimited by legal concessions, the lack of sanctions increases deforestation and leads to the formation of criminal networks that cut down trees to sell charcoal in the markets of the major capitals of Central African states. The rules and contracts drawn up by the Central African states within the concessions are mostly not respected by foreign logging companies and artisanal loggers. The sale of logging concessions, despite the lack of supervision, further accentuates the deforestation of the primary forest and degrades the environment of plant and animal species. The disappearance of trees affects species that cannot adapt to their new environment while reducing the livelihoods of native populations. In addition, the loss of forest cover could disrupt rainfall from the Sahelian zone to eastern Ethiopia, and intensify food insecurity in areas that have been destabilized by decades of conflict. Thus, the preservation of the Congo Basin forest is essential to protect forest-dependent populations and to fight against climate change.