



Development Cooperation
Ministry of Foreign Affairs



Global Compact Network
Netherlands



International conference on The Future of Central African Forests and its People

More than 140 people gathered in Den Haag on 31 May to hear from experts from the Central African region and those who have worked there. They told the assembled participants, from the Dutch government, private sector, academia, NGOs and civil society from the region and Europe, on the importance of the Congo Basin forests but also the increasing threats they face. But there was also much hope, with the sharing of concrete actions that have worked, and what more can we do, including suggestions for a Dutch development agenda that could support private sector engagement in the sustainable use of Central African forest landscapes.



“Organize, don’t agonize”, was a key message from Alphonse Maindo, Director of Tropenbos-DR Congo from Kisangani in the eastern part of the country. “Forests are crucial for local people and governance and guaranteeing their rights are immediate issues” he explained, “Invest in the people, 150 million lovely people – that is a resource as great as our forests.”



Cécile Ndjebet from Cameroon and President of the African Women’s Network for Community Management of Forests (REFACOF) with members in 17 countries, added that “If you don’t invest in rural women, then the future of Congo Basin forests can be in no way assured. We see what women can do, but if rights are not secure, poverty will never be overcome and sustainable forestry will never be achieved...”.

The conference was co-organized by the Netherlands Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Global Compact Network – Netherlands, and Tropenbos International.

Key points

- *Congo Basin forests are an essential resource for those who live in and around them, and for regulating climate far beyond, so we must ‘think beyond the forest’ at the landscape level, and consider energy, agriculture, mining, etc.*
- *To safeguard the forests, we must invest in women, improve land rights, tenure and participatory land use planning, responsible production and trade.*
- *Help to engage the private sector with local communities to develop inclusive business models, and strengthen institutions as an added step to improving land and forest governance.*

Congo Basin forests are of great significance to Africa and to the world, and together, they make up the second largest contiguous tropical forest on Earth. Tens of millions of people depend on them directly for their livelihood, hundreds of millions more depend indirectly and they are essential for maintaining climate and rainfall regimes over all of Africa. This was confirmed during the opening session, from Ardi Stoios-Braken of the Netherlands Ministry of Foreign Affairs, André van Heemstra of the Global Compact Network-Netherlands, and René Boot of Tropenbos who also chaired the conference. Verina Ingram of Wageningen University and Henk Hoefsloot of Tropenbos introduced the region, trends in deforestation, and the precarious present situation. And we also heard about a very different approach to the problem and a solution from Renzo Martens of the Institute for Human Activity, and their success in linking art to a more sustainable and equitable use of land in DR Congo.



There are many issues and challenges, but we also shared examples of ways forward, and how Central African governments - and its people, in partnership - overcome the social and environmental challenges the region faces. In the panel debate, were Leslie Ouarzazi of the Central African Forest Initiative, Jaap van der Waarde of WWF-Netherlands, Hans Beeckman of the Royal Museum for Central Africa and Tullia Baldassarri of the timber company Interholco, in addition the other speakers.

After the key presentations and a panel discussion, Rene Boot, Director of Tropenbos International, who also chaired the conference, summarized the views. “All panellists emphasized the importance of Congo Basin forests, both locally and globally. And the importance of women, land tenure and participatory land use planning was driven home - involving local people in meaningful dialogue and not with top-down approaches. We must strengthen institutions and governance, and while this will not be an easy task, examples such as the Voluntary Partnership Agreements for timber show under FLEGT us that this *does* lead to better governance. And we must look to work with the private sector to develop inclusive business and financing models.” These should include commodities such as cocoa, timber, rubber and oil palm, but also specialised high-value but low-volume non-timber forest products. And what roles the Dutch government could play were suggested, such as to support compliance with relevant international agreements, curbing trade in conflict minerals, and to influence policy and trade reforms that support any of these recommendations.”

Central African Forests Forever, Meindert Brouwer’s new book, was also launched at the end of the conference. With its mix of eyewitness reports, interviews and expert opinion, it offers an inspiring view of the opportunities, and solutions, to conserving Congo Basin forests and their megabiodiversity. It is essential reading to everyone interested in knowing more about this exceptional and beautiful part of the world. There is also a French edition; and for a preview and to order a copy, see www.centralafricanforests.org.



For information, contact: Herman Savenije, Tropenbos International (herman.savenije@tropenbos.org)