

Backgrounder

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Cassava farmer, DRC. Credit: Olivier Girard/CIFOR/ Flickr via Creative Commons (CC BY-NC-ND 2.0)

Transformative change to reduce deforestation in DRC

Paving the way with a different kind of conversation about smallholder agriculture

In the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), national food security and forest conservation have competed for decades, with the former prevailing. With rapid growth in population and agricultural production predicted, concern about forest loss is mounting.

For three decades, variations on the 'integrated conservation and development' (ICD) approach have dominated forest conservation. ICD presents as a win-win: strengthening forest protection and supporting local communities to reduce the threats to forests (in this case, the key threat is thought to be shifting cultivation by smallholder farmers: clearing new land while previously farmed land rests). But conservation goals typically reflect the national and global priorities of powerful actors, with little recognition of the interests and rights of local peoples.

ICD has been tried in thousands of conservation sites across the world, with limited success. In the last ten years Reducing

Deforestation and Forest Degradation (REDD+) has been developed to address key weaknesses of ICD, but it is also failing beyond a few islands of success. Current approaches to forest conservation in DRC, including one which seeks to displace, replace and intensify the agricultural system (known as DRI), look like more of the same but on a larger scale. Our analysis shows DRI to be unrealistic (relying on much stronger governance than exists) and unethical (having major negative social impacts on some of the poorest people). It is also unnecessary — conservation goals may be reached by strengthening the existing agricultural system, at least to the same level as any other viable strategy.

The power of compromise

A landmark study of ICD concluded that "pre-existing assumptions about the "right" approach to conservation obscure important differences in both power and understanding,

FACT AND FIGURES

- The Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) contains the second largest tropical forest in the world, covering about 67% of the country
- The UN estimates DRC will be home to nearly 200 million people by 2050. Domestic demand for roots and tubers will treble over this period; demand for cereals will multiply by six. FAO estimates that DRC could become the world's seventh biggest agricultural producer
- Expansion of farming food crops for domestic use is currently by far the biggest cause of deforestation in DRC
- DRC has a bad case of the 'resource curse' — the paradox that countries with an abundance of natural resources (in this case minerals) tend to have less economic growth, less democracy and worse development outcomes than those with fewer natural resources.

KEY SPACES

Mai Ndombe province is the focus of major investment by the World Bank and others, seeking to ensure this area drastically reduces rates of deforestation while improving local livelihoods. The province represents 5% of DRC's total area, with 62% of this currently forested. With funding and attention already secured, Mai Ndombe is fertile ground for transformative change to take root, if the right foundations can be laid.

Biodiversity is increasingly coming under the political spotlight, and in May 2019 a global assessment of the state of biodiversity and ecosystem services was published by the Intergovernmental Science-Policy

and can limit the success of policy and programmatic interventions” (McShane et al., 2011). Our analysis stresses the need to focus on an economic transformation that adds value to standing forest along with a ‘trade-off management’ approach that effectively engages a wider range of stakeholders.

Trade-offs in Mai Ndombe have been thoroughly studied in terms of ecosystem services. However, trade-off management is as much social, economic and political as it is ecological: it recognises a whole range of different objectives and perspectives, seeks compromise and requires that local voices, including the smallholder farmers most reliant on the land, are heard alongside powerful external actors. Food production should be considered a legitimate goal alongside conservation rather than being cast as the problem.

A range of strategies can help deliver more effective and equitable trade-off management:

- Increasing benefits and reducing costs for different stakeholders
- Reducing negative interactions between competing objectives (for example, land use planning)
- Enhancing synergies (for example, payments for ecosystem services)
- Strengthening governance, land rights, monitoring and learning.

In the current context, transformative change in DRC’s natural resource governance will only be achieved with a genuine multi-stakeholder process that changes the balance of power.

Potential in Mai Ndombe

It is a bleak outlook for DRC’s forests, but Mai Ndombe could offer some hope. The province is already the focus of investment; activities to reduce deforestation include incentives for farmers as well as support for capacity building and other enabling conditions. Our research considered how to revitalise forest conservation efforts that have been paralysed, in part, by the divergent perspectives of international nongovernmental organisations, donors, companies and other external actors who influence government. We spoke to a wide range of key stakeholders as well as reviewing the available literature.

We found that while many conservationists blame smallholder farmers for Mai Ndombe’s deforestation — arguing that ‘shifting cultivation’ is ecologically inefficient — much can be done to improve its efficiency. To realise this, smallholder farmers must be at the centre of the effort.

It is a good time to take a closer look at trade-off management in Mai Ndombe: there have been important advances in facilitating multi-stakeholder processes and in understanding the social and political dimensions of trade-offs, and there are new tools for trade-off analysis and management. Last but not least, there is better understanding of how to improve the ecological efficiency and benefits of shifting cultivation so that in modified form it can genuinely be part of the solution.

To support this approach, policymakers and practitioners must give more attention to the less visible, indirect drivers of deforestation, including poor governance and wider economic challenges. These intensify competition between food production and forest conservation objectives, and limit progress towards more effective, equitable trade-off management.

Looking ahead

Polarised perspectives — in particular over shifting cultivation — have long impeded DRC’s forest conservation. This is reflected in national policy: there is a failure to link policies to boost the agriculture sector and those to reduce deforestation.

The starting point for transformative change must be a different kind of conversation about smallholder agriculture. To begin this, we recommend:

- Stronger engagement with local and indigenous communities
- Focusing on managing trade-offs rather than reducing threats
- More attention to the social and political aspects of trade-offs
- More focus on indirect drivers of deforestation, including governance and economic transformation.



Knowledge Products

The International Institute for Environment and Development (IIED) promotes sustainable development, linking local priorities to global challenges. We support some of the world’s most vulnerable people to strengthen their voice in decision making.

Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services (IPBES). It recognises changes in land use as the greatest direct driver of biodiversity loss and that averting catastrophic biodiversity loss will require transformative change: “a fundamental, system-wide reorganisation across technological, economic and social factors, including paradigms, goals and values.”

WHY IT IS IMPORTANT

The forests of Mai Ndombe, and of DRC more widely, are vital resources. Their loss affects us all. Local people value the forests for water, wood, food and medicinal products, as well as for their cultural value. Regionally and globally, the same forests are valued for their rich biodiversity and their crucial role in mitigating climate change, providing watershed protection and stabilising the climate. We understand better than ever the need to urgently ‘bend the curve’ of biodiversity loss, and few places on earth are as rich in biodiversity as the Congo Basin. But there is no end in sight to deforestation in DRC: domestic food production continues to rise to meet increasing demand, driven by economic growth and population increase, and governance remains weak. We must urgently find new ways to combat deforestation that are effective, sustainable and equitable to replace the failing and all-too-often very inequitable approaches of the past.

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FIND OUT MORE

This paper is an overview of findings from an IIED working paper by Phil Franks and Mariteuw Chimère Diaw: Diaw, MC and Franks, P (2019) Production alimentaire, expansion agricole et déforestation au Mai-Ndombe, RDC. IIED, London, available at pubs.iied.org/17652FIIED (in French only, full summary translated into English at pubs.iied.org/17652IIED). In this paper we quote McShane, T et al. (2011) Hard choices: Making trade-offs between biodiversity conservation and human well-being. *Biological Conservation*. 144, 966–972.