

# **Ministry of Forest Economy and Environment Republic of Congo**

## **Independent Monitoring to protect forests in the Republic of Congo**

### **Government teams with NGOs to tackle illegal logging**

Forests and timber trade in the Congo Basin are threatened by a number of rogue companies and individuals, who do not respect their contracts, do not pay their taxes and destroy what can also be a home to culturally diverse peoples who directly depend on the forest for food, building materials and medicines. The Government of the Republic of Congo has taken a major step to increase law enforcement, and made an unprecedented request to include local NGOs in its efforts. A long-term project of Independent Monitoring of Forest Law Enforcement answering this request has been designed by the British NGOs Resource Extraction Monitoring and Forests Monitor in collaboration with the Congolese Ministry of Forest Economy and Environment, as a result of a successful scoping mission in Congo last October.

The scoping mission found that local NGOs, although sometimes critical of the forest law shortages, have called for increased and indiscriminate enforcement of existing provisions.

Many of the companies or individuals breaking forest laws are confident that they will go unpunished, taking advantage both of unstable political situations and protective remoteness of their activities. Some companies may facilitate access to their sites because their operations are legal and they do not fear an inspection. Those who do not respect the law can, however, use their logistical or technical advantage to conceal evidence or steer officials away from illegal logging. The Ministry of Forests in the Republic of Congo already has a high level technical ability, but would benefit from logistical and technological support to be able to retain its independence in inspections.

The Congo Basin contains the second largest area of tropical rainforest in the world after the Amazon Basin. Renowned for its biodiversity, this forest is perceived as a potential source of profit by governments and is allocated to individuals, national and international companies for harvesting. A large part of timber extracted is sold to Europe and Asia, where it is made into furniture and other items and eventually finds its way to our homes. The public has grown concerned about buying timber that contributes to forest destruction, but is confused about purchasing options. International pressure has mounted for the industry at large to comply with national laws. As for companies in the region moving towards good practice and maybe even the certification of their timber, they have complained that their efforts are undermined by unfair competition, and a poor international image of their sector due to illegal operations.

The Ministry of Forests Economy and Environment in the Republic of Congo has teamed with REM to improve law enforcement. Trial joint investigations in two forest exploitation sites have already uncovered illegalities and helped identify action points to improve inspections. A long-term project of Independent Monitoring of Forest Law Enforcement has been designed by REM and Forests Monitor, following consultation with the Ministry.

Independent Monitoring of Forest Law Enforcement with a government-NGO partnership is not new in the region. The Republic of Congo, however, has also requested the participation of local NGOs in a long-term project. "The Project is interesting to our Ministry, notably regarding reinforcement of capacities", says the Minister Henri Djombo. "The project would take account of civil society and local NGOs in monitoring techniques of forest exploitation and implementation of the law. For this reason, the local transfer of tools and technologies to support sustainable forest management, is very much welcome."

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