

Congo Basin forests: a call for sustained commitment

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Addressing the Ministerial Meeting on Forests on 14 March 2005, the President of the Republic of the Congo emphasized the need for regional and international commitment to sustainable forest management in the Congo Basin.

It is an honour to address you on the occasion of this important meeting on forests, organized as part of the seventeenth session of the Committee on Forestry. I should thus like to express my deep respect and thanks to Mr Jacques Diouf, the Director-General of FAO, who was so kind as to invite me.

FAO has been doing remarkable work in the field of forest management in the past few years. As a source of worldwide information on forestry, it plays a major role by coordinating activities focusing especially on:

- knowledge, evaluation and use of the world's forest resources;
- the dynamics of ecosystems;
- technical and financial support to member countries, especially regarding institutional issues and field programme implementation.

Various countries have benefited – and continue to do so – from FAO's support

and assistance. The long cooperation my country has enjoyed with FAO in the particular field of forest management is an excellent example.

FAO SUPPORT TO CONGO FORESTS

During the 1970s, FAO supported the Congo in assessing the forest resources in the north and southwestern parts of the country, which cover an area of about 3.1 million hectares. This work provided information then used in setting up forest management units and developing the first forest management plans, thereby laying the foundations for the rational forest management to which the Congo is committed. The inventory programme continued during the 1980s, covering 1.3 million hectares of forests in the south of the country.

As part of the Tropical Forest Action Plan launched in 1985, which had the main objective of combating deforesta-

President Denis Sassou Nguesso of the Republic of the Congo addresses FAO's Ministerial Meeting on Forests



Denis Sassou Nguesso is the President of the Republic of the Congo

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In Central Africa (and shown, in the Republic of the Congo) forests are often burned for the sake of subsistence; the most widespread cause of forest fires is slash-and-burn agriculture



tion, in the 1990s the Congo drew up its national forestry plan, which has become the frame of reference for planning development of the forest sector.

New initiatives are currently under way at the national and subregional levels, in particular involving support for the national forest programme, promotion of non-wood forest products and support for the Conference of Ministers in Charge of Forests in Central Africa (COMIFAC). In reiterating my gratitude to FAO, I hope that this cooperation will be stepped up and expanded.

FOREST FIRE: EFFORTS IN CENTRAL AFRICA

Two major issues concerning forest management will be tackled during the current session: international cooperation to combat forest fires and the quest for international commitment to sustainable forest management.

There is no doubt that forest fires, whatever their cause, contribute to the destruction of biological diversity and soil degradation, with a negative impact on the environment and the economy.

In Central Africa, as elsewhere in the world, fires cause some of the worst devastation of forests. In our countries the necessary battle against this scourge is sometimes a quandary, for forests are often burned for the sake of subsistence: bush fires for hunting and spontaneous fires during the dry season, all to permit survival. However, the most important

and widespread cause of forest fires is slash-and-burn agriculture, an ancient practice in which vegetation is burned so the land thus cleared can be cultivated.

Despite measures encompassed in national legislation and related texts, forest fires are still a major concern in the Central African subregion. If an effective solution to this serious problem is to be found, each country must take adequate measures, focusing on:

- the incorporation of fire management into national forest policies;
- the prevention of forest fires as part of the ten-year Earth Observation System plan;
- the formulation of fire intervention plans;
- the promotion of more productive and environmentally friendly agriculture.

COMMITMENT TO SUSTAINABLE FOREST MANAGEMENT IN CENTRAL AFRICA

Major efforts are being made in the countries of the Congo basin to promote sustainable forest management. However, the development of relevant programmes is hampered by the high costs of their formulation and imple-

mentation, as well as by weak national capacities, especially in the application of new technologies.

Forest management is one of the key features of the strategic plan for the conservation and sustainable management of Central African forest ecosystems over the next ten years. Our countries therefore need major support from the international community to boost their national capacities through training, the application of new technologies, and research and development, and to increase investment in the forest sector.

The next session of the United Nations Forum on Forests, to be held in New York later in 2005, will certainly be a great opportunity to increase international commitment to forest management. We are depending on FAO to play a decisive, leading role; such a commitment on its part is bound to boost international cooperation on forest management.

BALANCING ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT AND ENVIRONMENTAL CONSERVATION

Your meeting comes a little more than a month after the second Summit of Heads of State on conservation and sustainable management of Central African forests,

held in Brazzaville on 5 February. At the end of this important meeting, the Central African heads of State restated their firm commitment to taking up the great challenge of rational, sustainable management of Central Africa's tropical forests, the second largest biodiversity reservoir in the world. In substance, they confirmed their desire to reconcile the demands of sustainable development with those of preservation of the vast forest ecosystems of the Congo Basin.

The heads of State signed an important treaty on the conservation and sustainable management of forests in Central Africa and adopted a Convergence Plan aimed at coordinating subregional activities and national programmes. COMIFAC was set up as the body responsible for coordination and monitoring.

Implementation of the Convergence Plan and the activities it comprises will need funding of about US\$2 billion, and the summit made an appeal for international solidarity. In response, some governments and international donors have undertaken to provide financial support to the efforts of the Central African countries, using innovative funding mechanisms.

Our hope is that these promises will be kept and that the rest of the international community will follow the lead of the donors who have already come forward.

PROGRESS IN THE REPUBLIC OF THE CONGO

I should now like to speak of what is being done in my country.

Since 2000 we have made sustainable management of the Congolese forests a key concern. New legislation enshrining sustainable forest management has been promulgated and now provides the framework for our forest policy and action.

The Congo has a network of protected areas amounting to about 3.7 million hectares, or 11.2 percent of the country's total area. Inventories have been made of 8.2 million hectares of forest, or 41.3 percent of the country's forest cover. Sustainable management plans are now being implemented on ten forest concessions covering about 4.2 million hectares, and this programme will be extended to all remaining forest concessions.

Innovative programmes, concerned, for

example, with rehabilitating degraded forests or with wildlife management in forest concessions, are being developed in association with forest industry and international NGOs.

Overall, more than 50 percent of forests allocated for harvesting will be under management in the next few years, and the Congo will thus have an active role in promoting trade in certified wood. Considering that less than 3 percent of the world's forests, according to the International Tropical Timber Organization, are now under management, we may legitimately say that our country is moving forward in line with the policies of sustainable management of closed tropical forests advocated by the international community.

I would take this opportunity to express appreciation to the international community for the concern and various types of support it continues to provide for sustainable management of Congolese forests.

I feel that this is the place to point out that our country, the Republic of the Congo, which has just emerged from socio-political turmoil and needs all the support of the international community,

In Brazzaville in February 2005, Central African heads of State affirmed their commitment to reconcile economic development and forest conservation; shown, fishermen in a Congolese forest



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New legislation has been promulgated in the Republic of the Congo since 2000, providing the framework for sustainable forest management; shown, harvesting of wild honey

has just had its efforts at economic and financial rehabilitation recognized by the Bretton Woods Institutions through the signing of a programme with the International Monetary Fund. Its objective is to increase investments and boost economic growth in order to reduce poverty, ensure the country's social development and guarantee its people's well-being.

All our natural resources will need to be mobilized to achieve these noble goals and improve the prospects for future generations.

CONCLUSION

The Earth suffers appallingly from the devastation wrought upon it by human beings. Exploitation for timber, fires and the excessive use of fertilizers and pesticides destroy forests and vegetation and degrade biodiversity.

Our planet is in real danger. We must act quickly and together, not with falsely reassuring words, but with concrete actions.

It is true that encouraging advances in forest management are being made at the global level, but they are not enough, and there are still many challenges facing us. These challenges are known, identified

and analysed. What is lacking to meet them is genuine political will, ongoing dialogue and greater solidarity.

This concerns all of us, for it is a matter of the survival of humankind.

FAO must be in the vanguard of this struggle. It therefore needs to step up cooperation with other organizations and enhance its collaboration with inter-governmental bodies and international funding mechanisms.

Mr Director-General, I would repeat my gratitude for the opportunity to address you and express my best wishes for every success in your labours.

Long live FAO.

Long live international cooperation. ♦