

On its efforts to preserve Congolese forests, Kinshasa receives encouragement from international partners

Kinshasa/Bonn, 13 March 2009. The Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), which has the largest area of forest in the Congo Basin, has just embarked on a new phase in the process to ensure the sustainable management of its forests. At a consensus workshop held on 4-6 March in Kinshasa, representatives of the Forest Authority, donors, civil society and national and international non-governmental organisations made concrete proposals to implement reforms in the forest sector. Having completed a participatory process to verify and analyse the compliance of old logging titles with the new Forest Code, the government is now moving forward with the implementation of subsequent phases aimed at establishing forest governance through the allocation of managed logging concessions in the DRC. Recognising the transparency of the logging title conversion process observed by the Congolese Government, the partners present in Kinshasa have joined with the World Resources Institute (WRI) and AGRECO, acting as an independent observer, who, in their final opinion issued in October 2008, attested that the process had been carried out in compliance with the legal provisions applicable in the DRC and general principles of law.

Hans Schipulle, the Facilitator of the Congo Basin Forest Partnership (CBFP), an initiative that brings together forty-five members, including states, the private sector, international organisations and nongovernmental organisations, sincerely congratulated the Government of the Democratic Republic of the Congo during the workshop on the strong political will that it has displayed and the proficiency with which this operation, a fundamental phase in the process to achieve sustainable forest management in the DRC, was carried out. Governance through land use management, strongly recommended in the Yaoundé Declaration adopted in 1999 by Central African Heads of State, seeks, among other things, to:

- ensure that the forest sector makes a significant contribution to the national economy as a whole
- improve the quality of life and standard of living of local and indigenous populations
- ensure the optimal realisation of environmental services (regulation of greenhouse gases and climate change, conservation of biodiversity and water recycling).

The first phase involved a legal review of existing logging permits. It examined 156 title conversion applications corresponding to a total area of around 22 million ha and, once all appeals including a review session had been exhausted, accepted for the moment 65 of them corresponding to an area of almost 10 million ha.

The CBFP Facilitator pointed out that the conversion of the old logging titles is just one element in the forest sector reform process undertaken by the government. He also highlighted the fact that, thanks to the enormous efforts made by governments, the private sector, civil society and CBFP members, who provided different forms of assistance to implement the operating plan established by the Commission des Forêts d'Afrique Centrale (Central African Forest Commission – COMIFAC) at the national and regional level, the Congo Basin forest has the lowest level of deforestation and negligible rates of conversion into industrial logging operations, compared with the planet's other two tropical forests (the Amazon and South-East Asia).

According to the President of the Interafrican Forest Industries Association (IFIA), the subregion currently has almost 11 million hectares of forest land operating under management plans. In addition, almost 4 million hectares of forest land in the Congo Basin are certified by the Forest Stewardship Council (FSC), which applies internationally recognised performance standards, and this figure could reach 10 million by 2012.

There is a consensus among CBFP members that sustainable management, aimed at timber production without any adverse effects on the environment or the livelihoods of people living in the vicinity of logging operations, is just one way of improving forest use. Activities are therefore in progress to develop alternative ways of developing the forest, including participatory zoning covering vast untouched areas of forest in the DRC, the finalisation of a legal framework for forest management by local communities and continued efforts to rehabilitate protected areas.

In view of the evident drive towards responsible and sustainable forest management in the DRC, any initiative that would result in a general suspension of sustainable industrial logging operations in the Congo basin or affect timber exports would be counterproductive and penalise the countries and logging companies in the subregion who have put a great deal of effort into managing forest resources sustainably. Such an initiative would, in fact, achieve the opposite effect of encouraging widespread illegal logging. It is therefore important for all those engaged in the fight to conserve the forests to become more closely involved in the process underway and to make a positive contribution to finding solutions to the many problems, instead of indulging in armchair criticism.

The partners do not, of course, underestimate the efforts still required in the DRC to improve forest governance, establish an effective strategy for controlling forest activities and ensure

more effective coordination of anti-poaching strategies and efforts. They are, however, pleased with the results of the Kinshasa consensus workshop, which constitute a key element required in order to move forward to the next important phases of the process, which involve cancelling old logging titles, clarifying compulsory clauses attached to the concession contracts (*cahiers des charges*) between the concession holders and the local populations, observing the regulations on sustainable forest management and participatory zoning of the DRC's forest heritage.

The CBFP Facilitator is calling for all willing partners to provide crucial assistance to the DRC for the implementation of management practices in production forests to promote poverty reduction, respect for the rights of indigenous peoples and the conservation of large mammal populations and plant and animal biodiversity habitats.

He knows that he can count on the full understanding of all the actors.

NB. For further information on the Kinshasa consensus workshop, please see the attached 'Final statement'.

For the full set of workshop documents, please see the website www.cbfp.org.