

Sankuru Agro-Forest: Climate neutrality, conservation and green economy through the development of an inclusive rubber tree industry in the territories of Lomela and Lodja (Sankuru province, DRC)



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Project goals

The overarching goal of the project is to help maintain forest cover and protect and restore biodiversity in the equatorial forests of the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), which are valuable sources of income, food and ecosystem services for local and global populations. The specific goal of the project is to encourage local communities to embrace sustainable management and exploitation models for the high carbon density equatorial forest, revolving around an inclusive rubber tree industry in the territories of Lomela and Lodja (Sankuru Province, DRC).

Background

The Democratic Republic of Congo is home to the second largest tropical forest in the world, which is an exceptional reservoir of carbon (up to 2,000 metric tonnes of carbon per hectare). **The province of Sankuru** is one of the country's main forestry regions. Deforestation has increased significantly in recent years, with large areas lost in particular to agriculture. In the 1960s and 1970s, the province of Sankuru (the territories of Lodja and Lomela) was a major latex (rubber)-producing area. Today, latex production is running at a slow pace due to the difficult and dangerous nature of tapping work, the lack of training and materials necessary for tapping, but also to the deterioration of evacuation routes and low global prices and their knock-on effect on the wages of tappers. Agricultural production – the main activity of households – amounts to little more than the production of consumer staples through subsistence farming, which is very affected by soil quality (rice and cassava), small-scale extensive livestock farming (goats, pigs, hens and rabbits), palm wine-making and hunting. Agricultural production is mainly self-consumed and very little of the rare left-over produce is sold at the farm gate or on the edge of the nearby "Nationale 7" highway due to the total failure of the transport infrastructure.

One of the major challenges in Sankuru province is, therefore, **to reverse the process of forest and land degradation, while rehabilitating and developing existing rubber tree plantations and supporting other agricultural productions.** The major challenges to be met in order to ensure the

revival of the rubber tree sector in Sankuru include (i) improving the productivity and production of the rubber tree **through agroecological practices**, (ii) market research into latex and associated agricultural products, (iii) access to financing by producers (iv) organisation and capacity building of stakeholders in the sector.

Theory of change

In this context, the project plans to launch **a revival of the rubber tree industry** following an inclusive and sustainable approach and to support **the transition to sustainable agroforestry systems** in order to reduce the pressure of deforestation, secure a diversified food supply and generate income for local communities.

To revive the rubber tree industry, the aim of the project is to create conditions conducive to the development of rubber tree products, triggering economic, social and ecological benefits for local communities. Another project aim is to steer the industry towards the criteria of equity, inclusiveness and sustainability.

Under this project, this ambition will be achieved through; (i) increased support for tappers and tapper associations aimed at improving tapping techniques (securing a responsible exploitation of the raw material) and better collective organisation of the collection work (ensuring the quality of the latex harvested), as well as support for the renewal of rubber tree plantations, (ii) close collaboration with the actors of the territory (in particular private operators: rubber exporters, local carriers) to ensure the organisation and functioning of the industry (including downstream) and the establishment of a fair and inclusive contractual relationship with rural associations (working on a transparent price formula and setting a decent, fair and stable price for a minimum period of six months, higher than a minimum price discussed and negotiated with local actors), (iii) *capacity-building of local stakeholders* that can ensure a long-term impact well beyond the project lifetime (e.g. by empowering local partners involved in training).

In terms of agricultural transition, the project will support the development of agroecological and agroforestry practices whose aim will be simultaneously to (i) promote optimised occupation and use of village lands, (ii) encourage the gradual abandonment of land-burning practices and (iii) improve food security conditions and the incomes of local families.

To support the process of identifying and disseminating innovations adapted to the context of the territories of Lomela and Lodja, the project will step up and foster the deployment of action research mechanisms at micro-local level. These mechanisms will be structured around two key parameters: (i) the research is conducted in projects established jointly with local actors and capitalising on local knowledge, and (ii) the research leads to action and contributes to socio-economic and institutional innovation processes. These include: (i) a panel of operational and short-term studies at project start-up (during the first four months of implementation) that will contribute to the production of knowledge, the precise definition of action research themes and the identification of operating systems and models (rubber tree/agro-forest) that can be scaled up or down, followed by (ii) long-term action research (i.e. throughout the project lifetime) involving an analysis of the conditions necessary to engineer a transition towards sustainable agro-forestry and agroecological models; this research-action will include the establishment of demonstration plots and farmer field schools or a monitoring of deforestation and carbon flows (stocks, sinks, sources).

Main activities

To work towards the revival of the rubber tree sector, the project sets out to: (i) carry out an inventory to identify and guide the conditions for a revival of the rubber industry from the technical, social and economic point of view (ii) build the capacities of local industry stakeholders, including those responsible for training, and (iii) foster consultation and dialogue between actors in the rubber tree industry and the territory, (iv) support mechanisms for storage and local transformation of latex.

As regards the agricultural transition, the project sets out to (i) identify, model and disseminate agroecological and agroforestry production systems that are non-extensive (rubber tree with food and/or perennial crops – such as coffee – or food systems via rice–legume associations/rotations), (ii) diversify sources of income and diets by promoting market gardening (home gardens) and short-cycle breeding and (iii) bring in reasoned land tenure and management methods.

Organisation

The project is organised around three main outcomes:

R1 - the conditions are created for reviving a sustainable and inclusive rubber tree industry by bringing on board village associations from the two territories, training operators and private operators active in the province.

R2 - Carbon-neutral or positive agroforestry models making it possible to diversify the diet while generating a surplus to self-consumption needs are identified and adopted by village associations.

R3 - Village associations work with the local authorities in a participatory approach to jointly develop natural resource management plans that help reduce deforestation dynamics.

Enabel (the Belgian Development Agency) is the lead agency overseeing the project rollout. As far as possible, Enabel abides by the strategic frameworks, priorities and structures of the DRC government, and works closely with partner institutions. For the strategic monitoring and specific coordination of the action, a **Strategic Coordination and Monitoring Committee (SCMC)** including representatives of the ministries concerned is set up at the provincial level (Sankuru). For the planning, organisation and execution of all project activities, a **Project Management Unit (PMU)** is set up by Enabel.

Implementing organisation

- Enabel (Belgian Development Agency)

Project partners

- *Main national partners:* community stakeholders (rural farmers' associations and local NGOs); Congolese structures for action research, higher education and training (University of Lodja, ISEA Mukumari, ERAIFT);
- *Main international partners:* action research, higher education and training structures active in the DRC on the project themes.
 - MRAC, Royal Museum of Central Africa, Belgium
 - Gembloux Agro-Bio Tech,
 - University of Liege.

Other major stakeholders

- Ministries and decentralised services;
- Local, provincial and national authorities
- The National Institute for Agronomic Studies and Research (INERA) in Mukumari
- Formal and informal private actors in the rubber tree sector
- Congolese civil society

Location

Territories of Lodja and Lomela, Sankuru province, DRC

Funding

European Union: EUR 4,150,000

Duration

January 2022 – January 2026 (48 months)

