

**FIRST PROGRESS REPORT 2023-2024**

# **Republic of the Congo**

## **Forest Partnership with the European Union**

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#### Acronyms

# 1. A Partnership for People and Forests

## 1.1 Initial Gains and the Road Ahead

The Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) establishing the Forest Partnership between the European Union and the Republic of the Congo was prepared jointly by the Prime Minister's Office of the Republic of the Congo and the Delegation of the European Union to Congo. This Partnership is driven by a shared commitment to combating climate change, preserving biodiversity, and promoting value chains development. The EU, recognizing Congo's vast rainforest and its crucial role in global carbon sequestration, sought to support the country in its efforts to protect this invaluable ecosystem. For the Republic of the Congo, this Partnership offered a unique opportunity to access crucial political, financial and technical assistance for sustainable forest management, community development, and the transition towards a green economy.

It was signed on November 8, 2022, on the sidelines of the COP27 climate summit in Sharm el-Sheikh by H.E. Ursula von der Leyen, President of the European Commission, on behalf of the European Union, and H.E. Jean-Claude Gakosso, Minister of Foreign Affairs, Francophonie, and Congolese Abroad, on behalf of the President of the Republic of the Congo.

In October 2023, in Brazzaville, Commissioner Sinkevičius and the Minister of Forest Economy, H.E. Rosalie Matondo signed the Roadmap for the EU-Congo Forest Partnership. Developed by Team Europe and the Republic of the Congo, this Roadmap outlines concrete steps to protect Congolese forests. This signing coincides with the Summit of the Three Basins of Biodiversity Ecosystems and Tropical Forests, bringing together key stakeholders to discuss cooperation in preserving vital ecosystems in the Amazon, Congo, and Borneo-Mekong-Southeast Asia.

The inaugural meeting of the political working group for the EU-Congo Forest Partnership took place on Thursday, March 21, 2024. It was led by the Minister of Forest Economy, H.E. Rosalie Matondo, as the focal point for the Government of the Republic of the Congo for this partnership, and the Ambassador of the European Union, H.E. Giacomo Durazzo, alongside the Ambassador of France, H.E. Claire Bodonyi, the Ambassador of Italy, H.E. Enrico Nunziata, the Chargé d'affaires a.i. of Germany, Mr. Arvedt Achilles, and the Chargé d'affaires of Belgium, Mr. Jean-Paul Charlier. It took place at the Ministry of Forest Economy in Brazzaville.

This Political working group meeting in March 2024 was the first of its kind, bringing together high-level representatives of the Congolese government and the European Commission and its Member States to discuss in an open dialogue the strategic issues, opportunities and challenges in the forest sector in Congo. The high-level political dialogue has resulted in a number of follow-up points for which all parties must provide concrete answers. These points are designed to ensure that the dialogue is productive and leads to tangible outcomes. Here are some examples:

- *Firm investment commitments to prevent market distortions* - The commitment of the Minister of

Forest Economy to timber processing and the prohibition of raw log exports are duly acknowledged, notwithstanding that EU-Congo trade already predominantly involves processed wood products. It is noted that certain concession holders have not adhered to their industrial investment obligations, with the marketing of unprocessed logs seemingly considered more lucrative. The EU raises concerns regarding the management of the interim period preceding the operationalization of industrial investments, such as within the ARISE (Integrated Industrial Platform) Special Economic Zone. The dialogue highlights the raw log export exemptions raised by the private sector during consultations and urges transparency concerning these exceptions, recommending the imposition of firm investment commitments to prevent market distortions arising from differential treatment of actors.

- *Team Europe support to the law on wildlife and protected areas* - The Minister of Forest Economy (MEF) emphasizes the need for support from partners to finalize the law on wildlife and protected areas, as well as its implementing regulations. Her consultation efforts, including with civil society, are acknowledged. This reform presents an opportunity to further integrate local communities and indigenous peoples in the management of protected areas and wildlife, in line with the Kunming-Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework. Team Europe expresses their availability to provide institutional support (national strategy for protected areas) and management assistance. An EU institutional support initiative, complementary to NaturAfrica, is under preparation, including assistance with drafting the implementing regulations for this law.
- *Acceleration of regulations for private investments* - Team Europe highlighted the Global Gateway Strategy's focus on mobilizing private investment through guarantees from development finance institutions (EIB, CDP, KfW, Proparco, AfDB, World Bank), requiring a stronger banking sector. Priority sectors for Congo include timber processing, biomass cogeneration, renewables, and sustainable agriculture. Potential projects exist, but forestry investments are stalled due to regulatory uncertainties. Team Europe urged the Minister to accelerate regulatory finalization and consider private sector concerns, respecting national sovereignty.

## 1.2 Overview of the forest sector, climate issues, environmental challenges

The Republic of the Congo is home to vast tropical rainforests in the Congo Basin, which play a crucial role in global carbon sequestration and provide essential ecosystem services such as water regulation, soil conservation, and support for rural livelihoods. Despite its rich forest cover and relatively low deforestation rate (0.1% per year), the country faces significant challenges in Sustainable Forest Management (SFM) and climate change<sup>1</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> FAO (2020). *Global Forest Resources Assessment 2020: Main Report* <http://www.fao.org/forest-resources-assessment/>

A major concern for effective forest management includes deforestation and degradation, mainly caused by illegal logging, agricultural expansion for cocoa and other crops, and mining. These activities, along with unsustainable timber harvesting, contribute significantly to greenhouse gas emissions in the country. The charcoal industry, which provides over 70% of the country's rural energy consumption, is also a major driver of forest destruction, leading to land degradation, food insecurity, and diminished agricultural productivity.

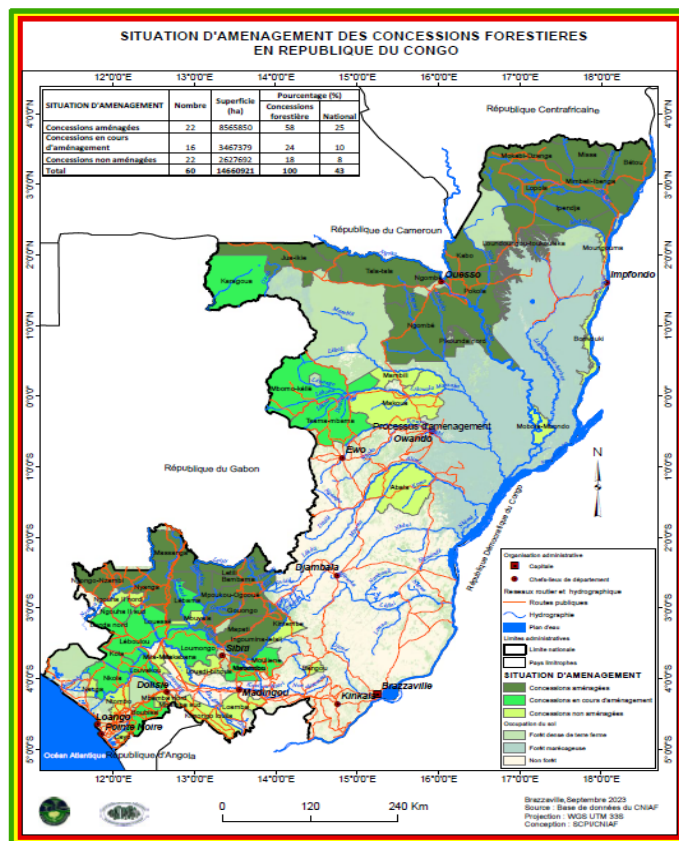
The impacts of climate change are already being felt in the Republic of the Congo, with more irregular rainfall patterns and rising floods and temperatures further harming forests and biodiversity. These environmental changes, compounded by human activities, make it increasingly difficult for rural communities to sustain the forest ecosystems they depend on.

As forest resources decline, communities are forced to extract more from the land, exacerbating environmental degradation and food insecurity<sup>2</sup>.

However, there are positive developments in the country's forest sector. Ecotourism is emerging as a potential solution, with protected areas like Odzala-Kokoua and Nouabalé-Ndoki National Parks attracting international attention for their biodiversity and tourism potential<sup>3</sup>.

Additionally, non-wood forest products (NWFPs), such as fruits, medicinal plants, and mushrooms, are gaining commercial value, offering sustainable alternatives to logging and contributing to rural livelihoods. The Republic of Congo also has strong potential for climate change mitigation, particularly through reductions in greenhouse gas emissions from the Land use, Land Use Change, and Forestry (LULUCF) sector.

To address these challenges, the country needs stronger governance, better forest management practices, and increased support for sustainable industries like ecotourism and NWFPs. Balancing forest production and conservation is essential to ensuring the long-term sustainability of Congo's forests and the livelihoods that depend on them.



<sup>2</sup> Central Africa's forests: Carbon heroes under threat - CIFOR-ICRAF Forests News

<sup>3</sup> WCS (Wildlife Conservation Society). (2021). *Conservation through Ecotourism: The Role of Nouabalé-Ndoki and Odzala-Kokoua National Parks in Central Africa* Nouabale-Ndoki National Park<sup>3</sup>

### 1.3 The Forest Partnership with the European Union

The Forest Partnership between the European Union and the Republic of Congo aims to support the country in its efforts to conserve its vast rainforest while promoting sustainable economic development. The Partnership emphasizes a shift towards a green and inclusive economy, aligning with the Nationally Determined Contribution (NDC), Reducing Emissions from Deforestation and Forest Degradation (REDD+), and Central African Forest Initiative (CAFI) commitments with the principles of the EU's Global Gateway Strategy<sup>4</sup>.

Aligned with NDC and REDD+, the key objectives outlined in the Forest Partnership include:

1. **Strengthening forest governance:** This involves improving forest management practices, combating illegal logging, and enhancing transparency and accountability in the forestry sector.
2. **Promoting sustainable forest economies:** The Partnership seeks to develop local wood processing industries, create green jobs, and support sustainable value chains, moving away from raw log exports.
3. **Conserving biodiversity:** Efforts will focus on protecting endangered species, conserving critical ecosystems like peatlands, and promoting sustainable land use practices.
4. **Supporting local communities:** The Partnership aims to ensure that local communities benefit from forest conservation efforts, including through improved access to resources, livelihoods, and social services.

By fostering sustainable forest management and promoting a green economy, the EU-Congo Forest Partnership aims to contribute to global efforts to combat climate change and protect biodiversity, while also supporting the economic and social development of the Republic of Congo.

### 1.4 Main achievements and lessons learned

The Forest Partnership has yielded achievements, demonstrating a model for collaboration in conservation and sustainable use of forests and sustainable development. Here are some key milestones. Through the Voluntary Partnership Agreement (VPA), a five-year (2024-2028) action plan has been produced with all stakeholders. It aims to an ambitious option for 2028: *while issuing certificates of legality, Congo is ready, in 2028, to carry out the independent technical evaluation of the national legality guarantee system*. To reach this important objective, the EU provided different

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<sup>4</sup> Indeed, the country's Revised First NDC (2021) outlines ambitious targets for emissions reduction, aiming for a 21.46% decrease by 2030 compared to a 2017 baseline under an unconditional scenario. A more ambitious conditional target of 32.19% reduction is also set, contingent upon international support. These targets encompass key sectors including energy, industrial processes, agriculture, forestry, and waste. Central to Congo Brazzaville's climate action is its commitment to preserving its extensive forests. The National REDD+ Strategy focuses on reducing deforestation and forest degradation, crucial for maintaining the country's vital carbon sinks. Specific, measurable goals underscore this commitment. Congo Brazzaville has pledged to restore 250,000 hectares of degraded and deforested land as part of the Bonn Challenge, a global effort to restore forest landscapes. Furthermore, the nation aims to prevent the conversion of over 20,000 hectares of forest annually.

financial instruments (EDF, NDICI, Civil Society Organisations, Facilities) for a total budget over 15 million euros, spread over several actions such as:

- Enhanced Legal Framework - The Partnership has supported the strengthening of Congo's forest legislation, including the development of the application texts of the new Forestry Code and the law related to wildlife (Loi Faune). One area of focus has been the development of laws governing community forests and simplified management of small concessions. These legal frameworks recognize the rights of local communities to manage forest resources.
- Strengthened Law Enforcement - The EU has also supported the digitalization of law enforcement in the Republic of Congo through the development and implementation of the Timber Legality Assurance System (TLAS). This system has improved the efficiency and transparency of forest management by facilitating real-time data collection and analysis, enabling better monitoring of logging activities, more specially concerning the transparency of fiscality and legality. However, the TLAS still needs proving effective in enhancing fiscality control and ensuring compliance with legal requirements by forest companies operating in the country.

The European Union has been investing in projects aimed at dismantling poaching networks in various regions. These initiatives have strengthened the capacity of law enforcement agencies, particularly judicial police officers (OPJ). Through training programs, OPJs are equipped with the necessary skills to investigate and prosecute wildlife crimes effectively. Furthermore, EU funding have improved the monitoring of judicial processes and the tracking of convicted poachers throughout their prison sentences. By enhancing the capacity of law enforcement and the justice system, these projects have already contributed to a more effective fight against poaching and the illegal wildlife trade.

- Promoting Sustainable Forest Enterprises - Support has been provided to develop and implement sustainable forest management plans for timber concessions, community forests promoting responsible logging practices and ensuring the long-term viability of forest resources.
- Concertation among private's actors - Thanks to the EU, expertise through The Association Technique Internationale des Bois Tropicaux (ATIBT) is supporting the private sector in the Republic of Congo. Through various initiatives, ATIBT has facilitated dialogue and collaboration among key stakeholders, including government agencies, forest operators. Notably, the EU has also fostered multi-stakeholder consultations to enhance transparency and accountability in the forestry sector. Moreover, the EU has facilitated interactions between special economic zones and forest operators, leading to discussions related to investment and value addition within the country.
- Diversifying Forest-Based Economies - The Partnership has encouraged the development of alternative livelihoods for forest-dependent communities, such as agroforestry, ecotourism,

and non-wood forest product value chains. Political dialogue still going on related to these opportunities.

- Increased Community Participation -The European Union has been actively engaged in fostering civil society participation in the Republic of Congo. A key focus of this engagement has been supporting independent forest monitoring, both mandated and non-mandated. By promoting transparent and accountable forest management, the EU aims to ensure that the benefits of forest resources are equitably shared. To enhance civil society involvement, the EU has succeeded to facilitate the participation of NGOs in consultative and decision-making processes related to forest governance, for example in the present legal reform. This includes providing platforms for dialogue between stakeholders, national authorities, private sector and civil society. For example, the project successfully empowered local communities in Mouyondzi district, enhancing their ability to participate in forest management with the private company. By strengthening local authorities and promoting inclusive governance, the EU contributed to the respect of local rights.

Following the commitments made through the **Convention on Biological Diversity** (CBD) and through the Cartagena and Nagoya Protocols, the EU has allocated €8.5 million to support three national parks in the Republic of Congo: Odzala Kokoua, Nouabalé-Ndoki, and Conkouati-Douli., which cover over 2 million hectares.

These funds, which are part of the NaturAfrica regional program, are being used to protect biodiversity, combat wildlife crime, improve socio economic development for communities and promote trans-border governance. The project focuses on a landscape approach, targeting cross-border areas and involving local communities.

The Forest Partnership has also generated some **key lessons learned**:

1. Up until this point, the Congolese government has consistently expressed strong public support for good governance initiatives. Yet, in practice, these initiatives have not been prioritized. This is evident in the delays in issuing decrees and memoranda, as well as the challenges in securing domestic funding. For instance, the Forest Fund, under the Minister of Forest Economy authority, generates nearly 2 billion CFA francs annually but is unable to fully fund essential field monitoring missions (requiring hundreds of millions of CFA francs yearly).
2. Effective Forest governance requires the active participation of all stakeholders, including government agencies. However, fostering equitable partnerships between the Government and private sector actors has been complicated by disparities in power dynamics. The Partnership has faced limitations in influencing external competitive forces that impact the forest sector.  
Changing governance systems is a complex and time-consuming process that requires sustained commitment. The success of the partnership hinges on strong political commitment from both the Congolese government and the EU. Consistent high-level engagement is crucial for overcoming challenges and ensuring the long-term sustainability of the initiative.

## 2. Contributions to national, regional, and international policies

The Forest Partnership aims to contribute to national, regional, and international policies by strengthening forest governance through VPA implementation and aligning with the EU deforestation Regulation to combat illegal logging. It supports protected area management through initiatives like NaturAfrica, focusing on biodiversity conservation and community development. By reducing deforestation and forest degradation, the partnership contributes to the Congo's NDCs and climate change mitigation.

It strengthens the legal framework, including the Code Forestier and Loi Faune, to protect biodiversity and combat poaching. Moreover, it promotes sustainable development by supporting forest-based value chains, creating jobs, and improving livelihoods. Finally, the Partnership fosters regional cooperation to address transboundary environmental challenges and strengthen regional forest governance. This collaboration contributes to global efforts to combat climate change (Paris Agreement), protect biodiversity (CBD), and promote sustainable development.

### 2.1 Contributions to the implementation of NDCs

The European Union, through the NDC Facility, provides financial support to Congo for the implementation of its climate commitments. This funding has notably enabled the Partnership to, for example (i) Strengthen national capacities: Training sessions are organized on green financial instruments, enabling Congo to mobilize additional green financial resources for its projects to combat deforestation and preserve ecosystems; (ii) Implement incentive mechanisms: The EU supports the implementation of incentive-based fiscal policies that promote sustainable forest management practices, such as a "bonus-malus" system. These possible initiatives have been discussed with the Ministries of environment, forest economy, and finance. And finally (iii) Improve monitoring and evaluation systems: An in-depth study on the status of the national Measurement, Reporting and Verification (MRV) system and the Enhanced Transparency Framework (ETF) has been carried out with the Ministry of Environment. This study aims to strengthen transparency and reliability of data on greenhouse gas emissions and report progress made in implementing the NDC.

### 2.2 Contributions to the implementation of the Convention on Biological Diversity and the National Biodiversity Strategy and Action Plan

The fourth workstream of the Forest Partnership focuses on biodiversity, directly contributing to several Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD) targets. These include targets related to ecosystem conservation, sustainable forest management, and strengthening in situ conservation measures. The NaturAfrica strategy, integrated into this Partnership, plays a key role in achieving these objectives. However, the National Biodiversity Strategy and Action Plan (NBSAP) of Congo is still not available. The *Country package* initiative led by France, with the UE, aims to address it in 2025.

The objectives of NaturAfrica and their link to the CBD targets are as follows:

1. **Conservation of biodiversity-rich ecosystems:** The monitoring, anti-poaching, and flora and fauna inventory activities carried out contribute to reducing habitat loss and protecting endangered species, aligning this initiative with CBD targets.
2. **Green economy for and by local communities:** By supporting ecotourism projects and alternative income-generating activities, NaturAfrica helps improve local livelihoods and reduce poverty while promoting biodiversity conservation. This aligns with CBD objectives to integrate biodiversity conservation into national poverty reduction strategies.
3. **Inclusive governance at the landscape level:** Strengthening local consultation and decision-making committees with principles of Free Prior and Informed Consent (FPIC) approach, as well as supporting cross-border partnerships, promotes more equitable and effective management of natural resources. This approach is in line with CBD principles aimed at ensuring the participation of all stakeholders in biodiversity conservation.

### *Gaps and Potential for Improvement*

While the contributions of the Forest Partnership and the NaturAfrica strategy are significant, further progress is needed to maximize their impact on biodiversity. The main challenges and opportunities for improvement are as follows:

- **Sectoral integration:** It is essential to integrate biodiversity into all economic sectors, including agriculture, industry, mining and infrastructure. Transversal collaboration through Ministries still be challenging.
- **Mobilization of finance:** The need for financing for biodiversity conservation remains significant. It is necessary to mobilize additional financial resources at both the national and international levels. Training sessions organized through NDC facility on green financial instruments should result on new national incentives.
- **Improved coordination:** Better coordination among the various actors involved in biodiversity conservation, transboundary and nationally, is necessary to optimize resource use and maximize the impact of actions taken.

## **2.3 Contributions to the Global Gateway**

The EU-Congo Forest Partnership is expected to contribute to the mobilization of finance and investment for the forest sector, aligning with the goals of the EU's Global Gateway strategy. Unlocking Private Sector Investment: The Partnership can act as a catalyst for private sector investment in sustainable forest management, REDD+ (Reducing Emissions from Deforestation and Forest Degradation), and forest-based value chains. EU support can de-risk investments, making them more attractive to private investors. This includes:

- Guarantees and blended finance mechanisms: The EU can leverage its financial instruments to de-risk private sector investments in sustainable forestry projects. Two forestry

compagnies have been approached for guarantees which aim to improve their cogeneration plant, the discussion still going on.

- Promoting sustainable forest-based businesses: Supporting the development of sustainable forest-based businesses, such as eco-tourism, timber certification, and non-timber forest products, can attract private investment. Aligned with our member states, private certification such as Forest Stewardship Council (FSC), or Pan African Forest Certification (PAFC) are promoted with the help of the German international cooperation (GIZ).

## 2.4 Contributions to the external impact of the EU Green Deal

### 2.4.1 Progress in compliance with the EU Deforestation Regulation (EUDR)

The EU-Congo Forest Partnership is actively working on the implementation of the EUDR. In May 2024, a technical assistance mission under the Trade and Private Sector Development and Engagement (TPSDE) facility assessed the readiness of the key sectors affected by the EUDR, namely timber and cocoa. Workshops involving over 15 companies from both sectors, as well as unions and traders, were organized to disseminate information about the EUDR and its implications. These efforts aim to support Congo in complying with the new EU regulation and promoting sustainable forest management practices. These consultations highlighted the need for increased awareness and understanding of the EUDR among stakeholders, especially Asian companies processing commodities and putting processed products on the EU market.

Furthermore, in 2023 and 2024, during the Joint Implementation Committee of the FLEGT VPA, the EU provided updates to Congolese authorities on the progress of the upcoming EUDR and its implementation (as from 31 December 2025). These updates focused on the alignment of national strategies with the EUDR, the strengthening of forest governance systems, and the development of sustainable supply chains. Building upon these initial steps, Congolese authorities have consistently emphasized the critical need for comprehensive capacity building to fully grasp and implement the intricacies of the EUDR. They have actively requested detailed explanations and clarification on the specific mechanisms of the regulation, particularly concerning traceability requirements, due diligence obligations for operators, and the utilization of the EUDR Information System. Recognizing the potential challenges for their national industries, the Congolese government has stressed the importance of collaborative efforts with the EU to develop tailored strategies and tools that facilitate compliance without unduly hindering trade.

It's important to note that the current focus through the VPA is not on implementing a full-fledged national traceability system. Considering the 10 years' experience on the deployment on the Timber Legality Assurance System (TLAS), lessons have been learned. Instead, the emphasis is on testing specific approaches to traceability for wood that serves the domestic markets, such as the "special permit" pilot targets community, to assess their feasibility and effectiveness in the Congolese context. If significant results are noticed, The Congolese government will have full discretion to develop the nationwide system.

## 3. Forest Partnership progress

### 3.1 Progress towards Forest Partnership targets

The targets defined in the Forest Partnership, and corresponding progresses, are:

#### 1. Increase the proportion of managed concessions

- *Baseline: 57% (2022) or 8.4 million hectares (ha) out of a total of 14.8 million ha of production forest*
- *Target 90 %, or 13,33 million ha*

The Republic of the Congo has witnessed weak advancements in forest management since 2022. The validation of a new management plan has been made (0.4 Mha). Furthermore, two companies have initiated on-the-ground studies to produce these plans (0.2 Mha). There are currently (2023) 16 forestry concessions, covering 3,467,379 hectares, for which management plans are being developed. 22 concessions with a surface area of approximately 8.56 million hectares, or 58% of the total area allocated to production forests, already have a management plan (RAC 2023).

#### 2. Increase the area of sustainably managed forests (FSC certificate)

- *Baseline: 20% (2020), almost 3 million hectares*
- *Target: 30%*

The achievement of private legality certification by one company and sustainability certification by another (1.2 Mha, PAFC) underscores the growing commitment to responsible forestry. Seven forestry concessions are certified (FSC, PAFC, Timber Origin and Legality-OLB and LegalSource), for a total of 3.931.667 ha, or 27% of the forestry concessions (RAC 2023)

#### 3. Data on rate of deforestation

The Republic of the Congo exhibits a relatively low deforestation rate compared to many other tropical countries. The target defined in the Forest Partnership is to reduce, if not stabilise, the annual rate of deforestation of natural forests: maintain 0,1 % until 2030. According to the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO), the annual deforestation rate between 2010 and 2022 was a modest 0.06%. This indicates a relatively stable forest cover over the past decade. Data from Global Forest Watch shows an increase of the yearly tree cover loss during the 2021-2023 period: 54.000 ha (2021), 54.000 ha (2022), 60.000 (2023).

#### 4. Data on forest-related jobs

- *Baseline: 7000 (2020)*
- *Target : 20.000 (2030)*

The social weight of the forestry sector is significant in the Republic of the Congo, with almost 11,000 direct jobs and around 5,000 induced/indirect jobs (CIRAD, 2025). In the activity report of UNICONGO (Employers' and Interprofessional Union of Congo) - Fédération Forêt, employees of UNICONGO forestry companies (CIB OLAM, IFO, Likouala Timber, Mokabi SA, Thanry Congo, Bois de Placage de Loupala, SICOFOR) are 5.700, of which 198 women and indigenous employees.

Compared with 2023, the number of employees has increased overall. As a result of the export ban, some companies have been forced to expand processing units, which has created new jobs in the industry. Other companies are facing energy supply problems in order to increase their processing capacity. Inconsistencies between the roadmap indicators and those available in the literature and from the sector should be addressed in the next progress report by clarifying the data sources and the method of calculation.

## **5. Data on trade**

The economic weight of the forestry sector in the Republic of the Congo is significant, contributing 5.6% to Gross Domestic Product (GDP). It accounts for 10% of the country's foreign trade, with annual sales of around 135 billion CFA francs and a contribution of CFA francs 20 billion to government tax revenues, according to the National Development Plan 2018-2022.

Today, there are around 30 industrial companies operating in the timber sector in the Congo. In 2023, more than 50% of Congo's timber production was still be exported in the form of logs (CIFOR, TERE, 2025). South-East Asia (67%) and Europe (27%) are the main export destinations for Congo. However, the notion that the European Union is no longer a major market for Congo and that the Asian market is sufficient should be reconsidered in light of detailed export data<sup>5</sup> and the Congolese government's policy of promoting greater processing. This aligns perfectly with the demands of European markets for processed products. A specific study should be conducted in 2025 detailing this matter.

## **3.2 Policy dialogue and technical coordination**

### **3.2.1 Key themes, working groups and inter-sectoral dialogue**

The Political Working Group (PWG) serves as a high-level platform for dialogue between the Government of the Republic of the Congo and the European Union on forest-related issues. It oversees the implementation of the Forest Partnership, reviews proposals from the Technical Working Group (TWG), and provides strategic guidance. The Congolese side includes the Minister

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<sup>5</sup> For the year 2023, Europe declares a total volume of 174,567.41 m<sup>3</sup> (27.23%) for all products, logs 16,836.91 m<sup>3</sup> (2.63%), AD sawn timber 68,233.37 m<sup>3</sup> (10, 64%), KD sawn timber 64,454.92 m<sup>3</sup> (10.05%), peeled veneer 12,151.93 m<sup>3</sup> (1.89%), laminated panels 10,779.03 m<sup>3</sup> (1.68%) and parquet, mouldings 2,111.25 m<sup>3</sup> (0.33%). (RAC 2023).

of Forest Economy (as the focal point), other relevant government members, and 8 collaborators. The EU side comprises the EU Ambassador, Ambassadors of EU Member States, 6 collaborators, and a representative from the European Commission headquarters. The group's mandate includes high-level dialogue, oversight of implementation, validation of progress reports, and addressing interpretive questions. Its objectives are to foster strategic dialogue, identify monitoring points and priority actions, and formulate guidance for potential support. Outputs include press releases and instructions for the technical working group. Meetings are held at least annually.

The Technical Working Group (TWG) supports the Political Working Group, providing technical expertise, and monitoring progress every three months. The group's mandate consists of monitoring roadmap implementation, consulting with stakeholders, and evaluating implementation of previous PWG recommendations. Core membership includes the focal point, the permanent secretary of the forest partnership which is under the Prime Minister, one additional representative from the Ministry of forest economy, and two EU representatives. Expanded membership may include representatives from other relevant Congolese ministries and European Commission services. Outputs include stakeholder feedback synthesis, tracking tables, and an annual report on partnership progress.

In essence, the Political Working Group provides strategic direction for the Forest Partnership, while the Technical Working Group ensures its day-to-day implementation. Both groups collaborate closely to achieve the partnership's objectives. Key Themes in the political dialogue are:

#### *Forest Governance: Strengthening strategic and stakeholder dialogue*

The EU has reiterated that reforms to the forestry regulatory framework must be carried out through a transparent, participatory and inclusive process with a clear agenda and the involvement of all stakeholders. It has been confirmed that implementing texts have been prioritized taking into account the discussions of the Multi-Stakeholder Working Group (GTMA). The EU continues to ensure an open and constructive dialogue with all actors in the forestry sector.

#### *Production sharing and log export ban*

The MEF has reiterated that production sharing is a reform desired by the government and an innovation based on a study that has revealed its applicability in the sector, its potential in terms of local wood processing, and the valorization of forest management plans. This reform is linked to the ban on log exports, with the aim of maximizing the valorisation of management plans (currently only 1/8 million m<sup>3</sup> is valorised), diversifying the species exploited, and promoting local wood processing by artisans/SMEs alongside industries, which will create jobs. A national company for the management of production sharing should be created for the operational implementation of the government's share. Although there are avenues, such as the transport of wood to timber yards, development of Special Economic Zones, many questions remain open (storage of logs, logistics, variety of products, etc.), in addition to the difficulties presented by the socioeconomic context: organization of sectors, business climate, national transport, energy, or governance/corruption. The regime of exceptions to the ban on log exports should cease in 2025.

The EU will need to ensure the maintenance of an open and constructive dialogue on the introduction of this regime with all actors in the forestry sector; the gradual and cautious introduction of the reform

to avoid turbulence for the private sector; and the conduct of an independent study on the socioeconomic impacts of the implementation of the production sharing regime.

#### *Conkouati-Douli: Conservation Policy and the Exploitation of Resources*

An oil exploration permit was granted by the Congolese government to a project majority-owned by China Oil Natural Gas Holding United, with the Congolese state holding a minority stake. This project is raising concerns among environmental organizations because it encroaches on part of the Conkouati-Douli National Park and its buffer zone. However, the Minister indicates that she has obtained the Prime Minister's assurance that the government will withdraw the exploration permit if the environmental and social study confirms the incompatibility. For the Minister, the essential thing is to continue to work for protection by addressing the issue intelligently based on a mapping of areas of interest and the possibility of territorial compensations in the event of declassification in protected areas. This last point must be followed closely, especially when the protected area is surrounded by forest concessions.

This conflict between protection and development will multiply in the future: other resources were not taken into account during the zoning/mapping carried out historically (from 1935 onwards). Explorations or discoveries of other resources are multiplying. Currently, the legislation provides that environmental impact studies are carried out by the concessionaires of the licenses, which de facto means that they aren't independent and are merely a formality.

The EU will need to continue to promote to the authorities the production of a truly independent environmental and social impact assessment in case of overlapping uses in the Conkouati-Douli National Park and ensure that it is made available to the public; monitor the start-up of the operationalization of the inter-ministerial land use planning committee; and continue to advocate for improved transparency on this issue.

#### *Respect for the rights of indigenous peoples*

The MEF subscribes to the absolute priority, especially for any external funding, represented by the well-being, rights, and sustainable development of local communities and indigenous peoples (LCIP). The parties also share the view that conservation efforts must bring tangible improvements to the quality of life of LCIP and allow them to be involved in the management of protected areas. However, concerning the allegations of international NGOs about the Odzala-Kokoua National Park, the Ministry has called for vigilance regarding statements reported by LCIP, deplores the lack of communication with these NGOs.

The Ministry's strategy to support the socioeconomic development of communities living near parks is built on: payments for environmental services (based on the Costa Rican model); a clear distribution key with communities of the benefits (including tourism); and the establishment of local development funds for the financing of micro-projects (production, processing, packaging).

### 3.2.2 Input to high-level forest summits or events

A key area of collaboration is reducing deforestation and forest degradation. Both parties recognize the crucial role of forests in carbon sequestration and biodiversity conservation. At the *3 Basin Summit* held in Brazzaville in November 2023, leaders from the Congo Basin countries, including the Republic of Congo, and international partners, including the EU, reaffirmed their commitment to combating deforestation and promoting sustainable forest management. This summit laid the groundwork for enhanced regional cooperation and strengthened efforts to protect the Congo Basin's vital ecosystems.

Furthermore, the *Afforestation Summit*, also held in Brazzaville in July 2024, provided a platform to discuss and implement ambitious afforestation and reforestation initiatives. The EU and the Republic of the Congo presented joint proposals for large-scale afforestation projects, leveraging EU funding mechanisms and Congolese expertise in forest management. These initiatives aim to increase forest cover, enhance carbon sequestration, and create sustainable livelihoods for local communities.

### 3.2.3 Contributions by EU member states and Team Europe

The Forest Partnership has undoubtedly been a catalyst for a suite of initiatives spearheaded by Team Europe. These projects, such as the Programme d'Utilisation Durable des Terres (PUDT), Programme de Promotion de l'Exploitation Certifiée des Forêts (PPECF), and Mosala, have been instrumental in promoting sustainable forest management and addressing the complex challenges facing forest ecosystems.

1. The PUDT, a five-year initiative (2022-2027) led by the French Development Agency (AFD), is a prime example of how the Forest Partnership has stimulated action. By focusing on sustainable land use, the PUDT aligns directly with the partnership's goals of preserving forest ecosystems. The program's emphasis on balancing economic development with environmental protection is a testament to the broader objectives of Team Europe. Complementing the PUDT is the PPECF, financed by the German cooperation ministry (BMZ) and implemented by the Central African Forestry Commission (COMIFAC). This program has been pivotal in promoting forest certification, ensuring that timber products meet international standards for sustainability. By supporting certification processes, the PPECF has enhanced the market value of forest products from the region, thereby incentivizing sustainable forest management.
2. The *Mosala project*, also led by AFD with EU funding, has a more focused objective: to address youth unemployment and gender inequality in the forest sector. By investing in skills development and promoting ecotourism, the project is not only contributing to sustainable livelihoods but also fostering a deeper appreciation for forest ecosystems.

3. The *Country Package*, a joint initiative by the EU and France, exemplifies the strengthened collaboration within Team Europe. This partnership focuses on forest ecosystems, nature, and climate, demonstrating a coordinated approach to addressing environmental challenges in Congo.

These initiatives, driven by the Forest Partnership through the Team Europe initiative, highlight a shift towards a more integrated and impactful approach to development cooperation in the Republic of Congo. By fostering collaboration among EU Member States and leveraging their respective strengths, Team Europe<sup>6</sup> is effectively contributing to the achievements of the Partnership.

### 3.2.4 Communicating the Partnership

Communication on the EU-Congo Forest Partnership is currently evolving. While a dedicated communication strategy is under development with support from the Forests for the Future Facility (F4F) and planned for implementation in 2025, several initiatives have already enhanced the Partnership's visibility:

- *The first political dialogue on the Forest Partnership in March 2024* provided a crucial platform for high-level discussions and raised awareness among key stakeholders.
- *The International Conference on Afforestation and Reforestation (CIAR) in July 2024* offered an opportunity to showcase the Partnership's objectives with our Team Europe Initiative (TEI) and achievements to a wider audience. The European Union's stand at CIAR 2024 was a hub of activity, attracting a diverse audience of policymakers, scientists, and environmental advocates. Organized as a Team Europe initiative, with strong representation from France, Germany, and Italy, the stand showcased the EU's commitment. A highlight of the conference was the visit of the Prime Minister and the Minister of Forest Economy of the Republic of the Congo, who toured the EU stand.
- *"Our Voice, Our Future: Acting with Young People Who Are Changing the World" Campaign* This campaign utilizes multiple channels to reach a broad audience. It includes media outreach, urban advertising, social media engagement, and a promotional video featuring influencers. The campaign aims to raise awareness about the importance of forests and empower young people to take action.
- *International Day of Food* This event features a range of activities, including solidarity meals, thematic workshops, a round table discussion, an agricultural market, and film screenings. The event highlights the connection between forests and food security, and promotes sustainable food systems.
- *National Tree Day (November 2024)* This day involves tree planting activities in the capital, led by government officials and community leaders. The event raises awareness about the importance of trees and encourages citizens to participate in reforestation efforts.

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<sup>6</sup> consists of the European Union, EU Member States — including their implementing agencies and public development banks — as well as the European Investment Bank (EIB)

- *Forestival* (November 2024) This event is a multi-faceted celebration of forests, featured an exhibition on EU Forest Partnerships and one on the FP with Congo, round table discussion, a project fair, open forums, thematic workshops, entertainment, and film screenings. The *Forestival* provided a platform for stakeholders to share knowledge, network, and celebrate the cultural and ecological value of forests.

These initial communication efforts have laid the groundwork for a more comprehensive strategy that will ensure consistent and impactful communication, effectively reaching target audiences and maximizing the Partnership's visibility and impact.

## 4. Looking ahead

The EU-Congo Forest Partnership presents significant opportunities for the coming years. Key priorities should include:

1. **Strengthening Forest Governance:** Prioritize reforms to improve forest governance systems, including strengthening law enforcement, combating illegal logging, and enhancing transparency in forest management. On-going and regular political and technical multi actor and multi sectoral dialogue is foreseen to enhance mutual understanding and perceptions and see where support is needed to overcome hurdles.
2. **Promoting Sustainable Forest Management:** Support the development of sustainable forest-based enterprises, such as timber processing, non-timber forest products, and ecotourism to create economic opportunities for local communities while ensuring environmental sustainability, which is part of the EU new program 2025-2027.
3. **Consolidate the compliance of forestry companies** with national requirements in terms of legality and tax affairs. This ambition is translated into the strengthening of a robust and efficient computerized verification system. Such a technological tool (TLAS) should ensure rigorous monitoring of forestry operations, from the allocation of logging titles to the processing and marketing of timber products. The digitalisation should contribute to reducing the risks of fraud, corruption, and illegal exploitation of forest resources, while optimizing the collection of tax revenues owed by the sector.
4. **Monitoring and analysis of reports** produced by the forest administration extracted from the TLAS. These reports constitute an essential source of information for assessing the transparency of activities in the forestry sector and identifying any potential gaps or irregularities. In accordance with Annex 10 of VPA FLEGT, information relating to forest management, logging permits, harvested volumes, taxes and royalties paid, must be collected, analysed, and made publicly accessible.
5. **Investing in Community / Social Forestry:** Empower local communities through community / Social forestry initiatives, ensuring their meaningful participation in forest management decisions and benefiting from the sustainable use of forest resources. This includes supporting communities in obtaining the necessary permits to manage their "Forêt Communautaire" (community forest), enabling them to effectively manage and conserve forest resources, and ensuring they have the opportunity to legally manage and benefit from the revenue generated through sustainable forest product harvesting. But also, via innovative models like Agroforest.
6. **Monitoring and Evaluation:** to ensure effective implementation of the Roadmap, a robust monitoring and evaluation framework is adopted. This will involve regular updates on the Roadmap's progress, based on the outcomes of quarterly or bi-annual (six-monthly) Technical Working Group (TWG) meetings. These meetings will serve as key forums for reviewing progress, identifying challenges, and adapting strategies as needed.

## Acronyms

AFD	French Development Agency
AfDB	African Development Bank
ARISE	Integrated industrial Platforms
ATIBT	International Tropical Timber Association
BMZ	German cooperation ministry
CAFI	Central African Forest Initiative
CBD	Convention on Biological Diversity
CDP	Carbon Disclosure Project
CFA	African Financial Community
CIAR	International Conference on Afforestation and Reforestation
CIB	Congolese Timber Industry
CIFOR	Centre for International Forestry Research
CIRAD	French Agricultural Research Centre for International Development
COMIFAC	Central African Forest Commission
COP	Conference of the Parties
CSO	Civil Society Organisation
EIB	European Investment Bank
ETF	Enhanced Transparency Framework
EU	European Union
EUD	European Union Delegation
EUDR	EU Deforestation Regulation
FAO	Food and Agriculture Organisation
F4F	Forest for the Future Facility
FLEGT	Forest Law Enforcement, Governance and Trade Action Plan
FP	Forest Partnership
FPIC	Free Prior and Informed Consent
FSC	Forest Stewardship Council
GDP	Gross Domestic Product
GIZ	German international cooperation
GTMA	Multi-Stakeholder Working Group
GHG	Greenhouse gas
IFO	OUesso Forestry Industry
INTPA	International Partnerships
KfW	Kredit Anstalt für Wiederaufbau (German promotional bank)
LCIP	Local communities and indigenous peoples
LULUCF	Land Use, Land Use Change, and forestry
OLB	Timber Origin and Legality
MEF	Ministry of Forest Economy
MRV	Measurement, Reporting and Verification
MOU	Memorandum of Understanding
NBSAP	National Biodiversity Strategy and Action Plan
NDC	Nationally Determined Contribution
NDCI	Nationally Determined Contribution Initiative
NGO	Non-governmental organisation

NWFP	Non-wood forest products
OPJ	Judicial Police Officers
PAFC	Pan African Forest Certification
PPECF	Certified Forest Management Promotion Program
PWG	Political working group
PUDT	Sustainable Land Use Program
REDD	Reducing Emissions from Deforestation and Forest Degradation
SDGs	Sustainable Development Goals
SMEs	Small and Medium-sized Enterprises
SFM	Sustainable Forest Management
TEI	Team Europe Initiative
TEREA	Land Environment Planning
TLAS	Timber Legality Assurance System
TPSDE	Trade and Private Sector Development and Engagement
TWG	Technical working group
UNICONGO	Employers' and Interprofessional Union of Congo
VC	Value chains
VPA	Voluntary Partnership Agreement