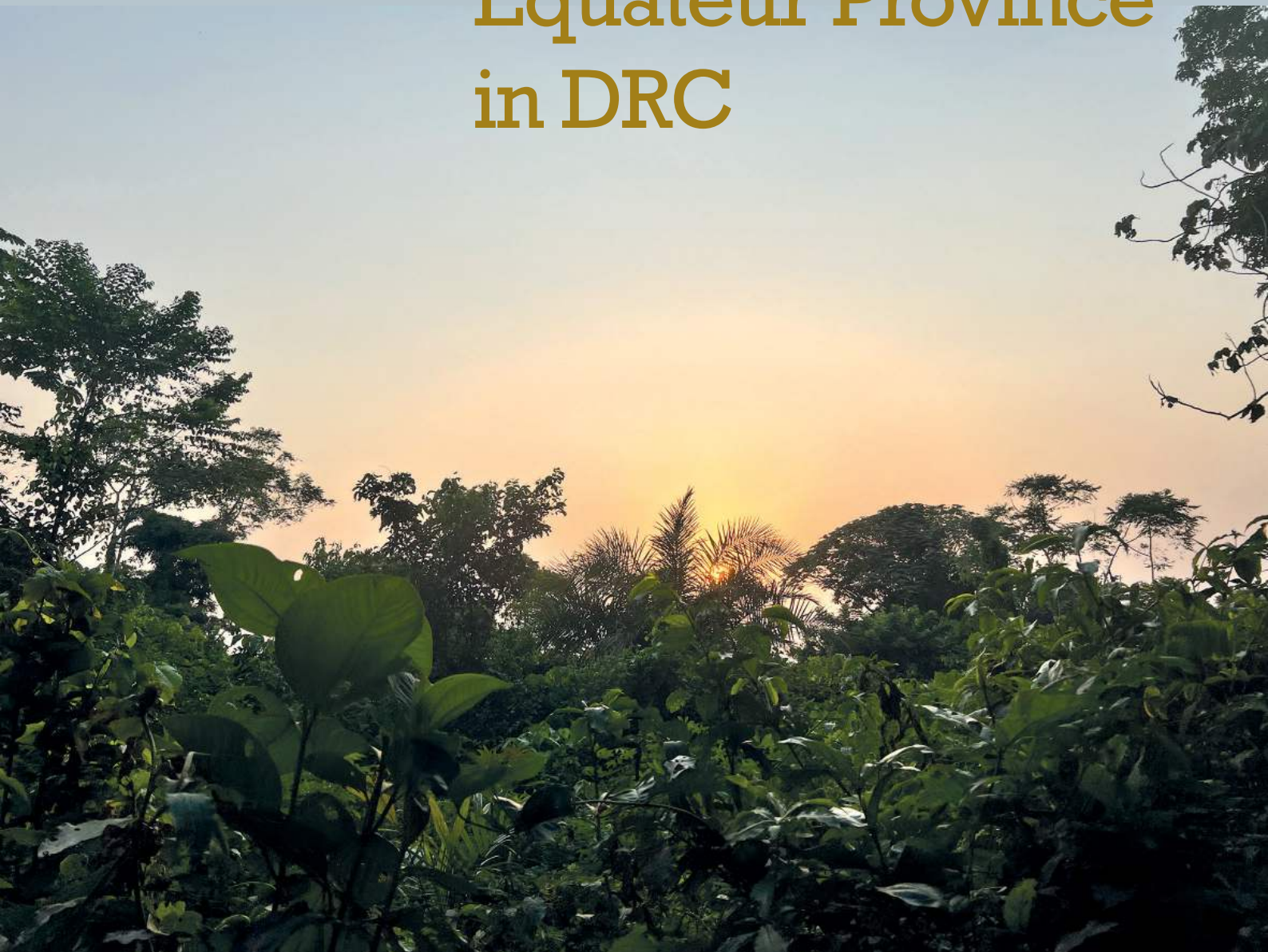


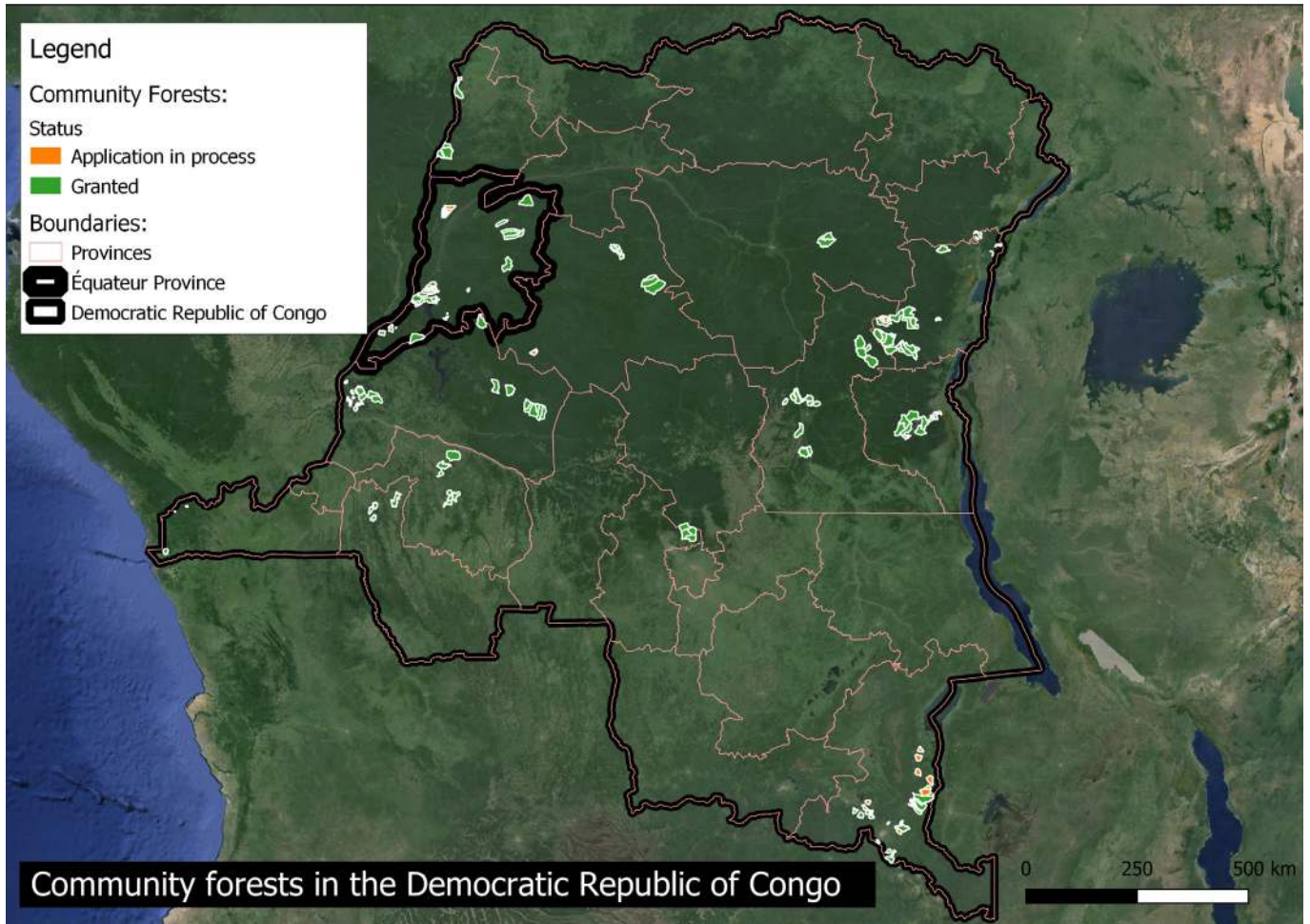


# Guidelines for establishing collective forest enterprises:

## The case of Équateur Province in DRC







**THE DEMOCRATIC REPUBLIC OF THE CONGO (DRC)** is the second largest country in Africa, and one of the richest in the world in natural resources. With about 80 million hectares of arable land and 1100 minerals and precious metals, the DRC has the resources to achieve prosperity for its people. The Equateur province in north-western DRC includes seven territories and covers 104,000 km<sup>2</sup>, of which about 87,000 km<sup>2</sup> (84 percent), is mostly forested. Against a backdrop of strong demographic growth and expansion of extractive activities, pressure on forests has been growing exponentially. For a long time, forest communities lacked legally recognised rights over their forests, limiting their ability to control and profit from the natural resources on the customary lands.

Tenure security is widely recognised as an essential precondition for sustainable development and particularly for creating a sustainable environment for forest businesses to operate. In 2016, the DRC

took a momentous step in this direction and signed into law a Ministerial Decree No.25, which completes the legal framework that enables forest communities to secure their collective lands for the first time in the country’s history. Through the allocation of ‘Community Forests’<sup>1</sup>, local Bantu and Indigenous groups living in forest settings within DRC can obtain perpetual rights over their traditional lands, as well as the ability to manage them for a diversity of purposes, including conservation, agriculture, fishing and small-scale logging. Importantly, the procedure to claim community forests is free of charge<sup>2</sup>. Since the passing of this law, more than 200 community forests covering almost four million hectares have been secured or are awaiting final approval<sup>3</sup>.

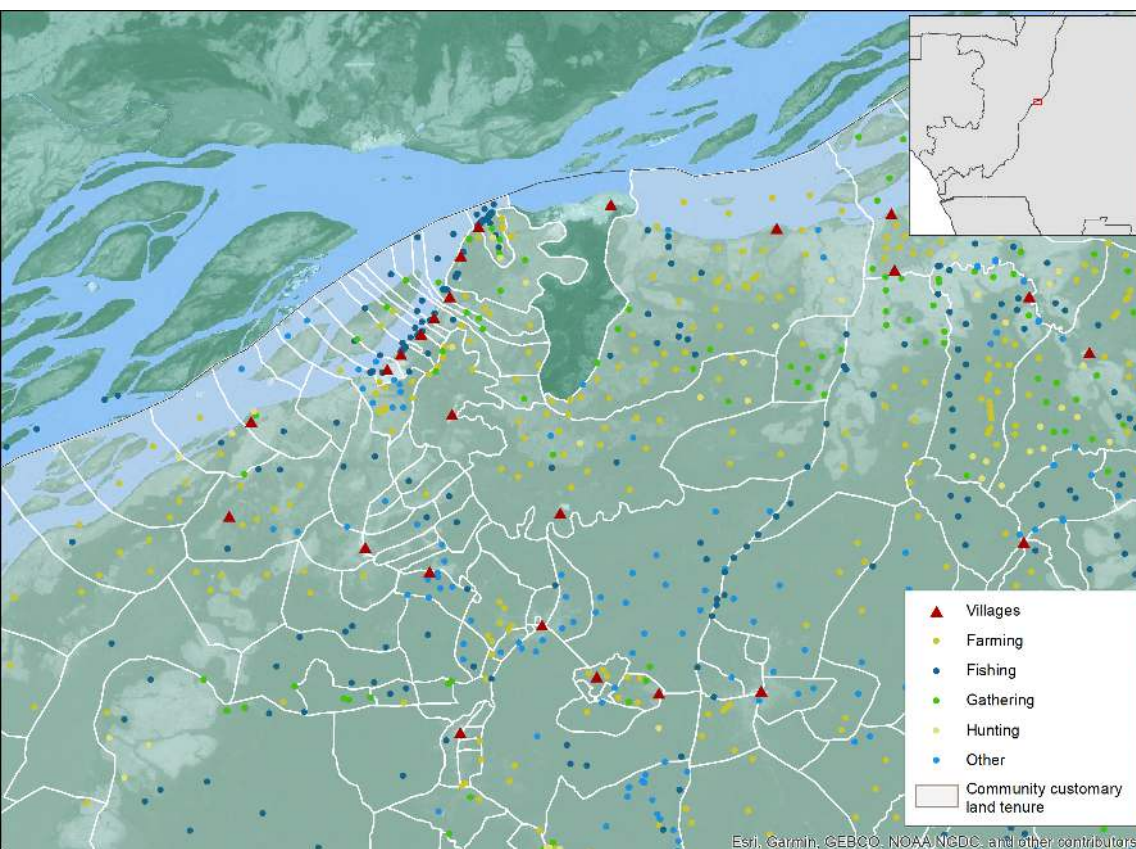
1 Formally, Local Community Forest Concessions or *Concessions Forestières des Communautés Locales (CFCL)*.  
 2 Although it should be recognised that producing the groundwork and documentation required to request a community forest is a costly endeavour, and more efforts are needed to make sure this is truly accessible to communities.  
 3 According to the official Community Forests database, in February 2024 there were 3,298,270 hectares allocated as community forests, and a further 568,627 hectares awaiting final approval (source: <https://rdc.geocfcl.org/applications/>).

This process could unlock new development pathways for the DRC and reduce deforestation, thereby creating a win-win situation for people and planet. The province of Équateur in western DRC, in particular, is a biodiversity hotspot of global significance, as well as being home to large part of the Cuvette Centrale peatlands, possibly the world's most important terrestrial carbon sink. Apart from its ecological riches, Équateur is culturally and linguistically diverse, with the majority of the population of approximately two million belonging to Bantu groups who depend mostly on small-scale subsistence farming and forest resources. Indigenous Twa people also inhabit parts of this territory, and tend to rely more heavily on hunting and gathering than Bantu communities. With its fertile soils and the Congo River connecting it to the capital Kinshasa and other urban centres, there is great potential for Équateur to develop a vibrant rural economy.

Rainforest Foundation UK (RFUK) and local organisation *Groupe d'action pour sauver l'homme et son environnement* (GASHE) have worked together since 2012 to lay the foundations for this type of forest economy. Over this time, the organisations helped communities to produce maps of their traditional territories, demonstrate their occupation and ancestral connection to these forests, and claim a collective title that would provide them legal security. The Community Forests law made this objective possible. Since obtaining titles to these lands, the communities that RFUK and GASHE work with have strengthened their internal governance, developed collective land use plans, and are now increasing their incomes through improved production of cacao and other products and better market access.<sup>4</sup>

Replicating and scaling up this success story is only possible with a combination of factors: the existence of the legal framework of Community Forests, the larger areas now under the control of communities, and

greater understanding of best practices. The purpose of this briefing is to share the key elements of RFUK and GASHE's approach and lessons learnt from the experience in Équateur so that it can benefit more communities, and to promote convergence amongst practitioners in favour of rights-based development alternatives to extractive models.



4 See more details here: <https://www.rainforestfoundationuk.org/success-story-economic-empowerment-through-community-cocoa-production/#:~:text=Today%20in%20the%20villages%20of,income%20while%20sustainably%20managing%20their>

## Preconditions for successful forest business approaches

In Équateur, as well as in DRC and the Congo Basin region more generally, collective land rights are only incipient, and land governance faces significant challenges. For this reason, ensuring the following elements are in place is essential to achieving sustainable and equitable development outcomes.

### Key principles in the RFUK and GASHE approach

#### *Free prior and informed consent (FPIC) and self-determination*

These principles underpin each step mentioned below. The right to self-determination is central to international law, and in this case, means that forest communities' vision should guide any support that is provided to them. In a similar vein, RFUK and GASHE seek the free, prior and informed consent from communities to begin and continue to work together. FPIC is an iterative process – it must be reconfirmed every step of the way and can be withdrawn at any time.

#### *Close proximity and long-term commitment*

The work described below requires close and constant interaction between forest communities and accompanying organisations. In this case, GASHE maintains a field office to ensure physical proximity to forest communities and a near constant presence of field facilitators and experts. The process described below has also taken place over several years, and a continued commitment is still required.

participatory maps that document customary tenure arrangements in a universally recognised geographic language<sup>5</sup>. According to custom, land in this region is mostly held and managed by clans: extended family groups who are recognised as traditional owners of a specific territory and have decision-making and conflict resolution powers.<sup>6</sup> Clans know their territories very well and, in most cases, neighbouring clans know and respect each other's boundaries.

Participatory maps also demonstrate the breadth and variety of livelihood and cultural activities these communities undertake. By capturing accurate geographic positioning system (GPS) points of their activities, they paint a vivid picture of their extensive knowledge and use of the forest, as the illustrations in the previous page show<sup>7</sup>.

The legal framework in DRC builds on this reality: it determines that community forests will be designated to groups with demonstrable customary links to the land, and that these spaces can be devoted to multiple uses<sup>8</sup>. In this way, communities can build on their traditional systems and develop diversified livelihood plans, which embrace the multiple ways in which they use forest resources.



### Securing lands

As part of their advocacy in favour of the Community Forests law, RFUK and GASHE worked with local communities to produce millions of hectares of

5 For more details on our methodology see: <https://www.rainforestfoundationuk.org/media.ashx/2909565-eng-low-res.pdf>

6 See: <https://www.rainforestfoundationuk.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/10/drc-moise-study-english.pdf>

7 See: [Congo Basin Community Atlas \(mappingforrights.org\)](https://www.rainforestfoundationuk.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/10/drc-moise-study-english.pdf)

8 This is an important innovation compared to other models of community forestry, which are more 'top-down' and focus on timber production.



The fostering of successful and sustainable forest businesses should be based on territories that build on existing tenure arrangements and traditional knowledge. As part of this exercise, neighbouring communities should also recognise and respect these boundaries, to avoid conflict.

### ***Building strong governance***

Community forests require a novel form of governance that begins with clan tradition, but expands it to incorporate several new concepts and principles. In a community forest, several clans come together to manage a larger, communal territory. Communities benefit from mentorship and facilitation to create new governance organs<sup>9</sup> that respect tradition but also embrace inclusivity, democracy, and accountability. Facilitation can help to enhance participation from traditionally marginalised groups, particularly

Indigenous peoples, women, and youths. This support must adapt to local contexts to devise the most appropriate way to elect representatives, hold them accountable and maintain community engagement. Transparency around election processes and ways of operation for each body are key in this respect. Strong governance bodies that the community knows and supports are key to ensure that forest use rules are respected, and to enforce an equitable and sustainable use of land and resources.

These changes do not happen overnight, and it is essential that they are not imposed by external actors. Governance mechanisms should be the result of internal deliberation and decision-making. In terms of inclusion and participation, RFUK and GASHE advocate for self-determination: the organisations aim to support all groups in the community, so that they can advocate for the changes that are important to them.

<sup>9</sup> According to Congolese law, Community Forests must have four governance bodies: a Community Assembly, Local Management Committee, a Control, Monitoring and Evaluation Committee and a Council of Elders.

A helpful technique to foster these processes is to identify strong leaders who can champion these ideas and inspire the rest of the community. Ideally, champions should come from all of the different groups mentioned above.

### *Participatory land use planning*

Once these internal structures have been set up, communities should gather to develop a participatory land use plan<sup>10</sup> that articulates their vision of development, and describes how they want to use each part of their collective territory. Our experience shows that essential steps in this process are:

- Promoting a common understanding of the characteristics and potentialities of the territory (including elevation, types of soil, types of vegetation, proximity to roads and markets, and simplified inventories of key resources)
- Visualising livelihood, cultural, and conservation activities currently taking place
- Reaching a common understanding of current development problems, and agreeing on pathways to use land more efficiently to overcome these problems
- Calculating future land needs, based the collective vision of development and projections on population growth
- Zoning the communal territory and defining usage rules and restrictions for each zone.
- Agreeing on a collective action plan to fulfil this vision, and monitoring its implementation

RFUK has supported participatory land use planning in hundreds of thousands of hectares in DRC, Cameroon and Peru. In most cases, including in Équateur, communities chose to devote most of their collective territory to conservation – an area of forest that should only be used for cultural and spiritual activities and

<sup>10</sup> The legal framework in DRC calls for the development of a simple management plan that must be approved by the authorities (this plan is not a precondition to obtain a community forest, however). Here we talk about land use planning more generally, as this is more adaptable to different contexts. For more information on the relevance of land use planning in the Congo Basin see: <https://www.rainforestfoundationuk.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/10/Mapping-the-future.pdf>

sustainable hunting, fishing, and gathering. Through this process, communities also recalled and reinforced traditional rules that aim to protect and preserve resources, such as restrictions to fishing and hunting. Right from the start, RFUK's approach aims to actively involve communities to agree to the process, then they select their own planners and finally validate the plan that they developed themselves. Ideally, governance bodies should have conflict resolution mechanisms to facilitate collective decision making which is effectively used at every decision-making stage. In cases where a community cannot agree on the activities they want to pursue collectively, they may even decide against creating a community forest. This decision should be respected.





With this type of planning, agricultural activities are typically assigned a specific space and collective agreement is reached that deforestation coming from them should be minimised. This ensures that agricultural activities can be carried out sustainably and contribute to the welfare of the whole community. A good zoning process will also identify the best areas for production of cash crops, considering not only soil quality, but aspects such as proximity to roads or rivers to enable product transportation. This provides more solid bases for communities to enhance their food security and build resilience in their livelihoods.

Importantly, a self-driven land use planning process ensures an adapted approach: each community defines what is best for them, increasing possibilities to succeed in subsequent steps.

## Business models with strong foundations

As discussed, legal security over lands, strong internal governance, and a participatory land use plan are preconditions for forest businesses to thrive. Once these elements are in place, however, the work continues. In Équateur, RFUK and GASHE are working closely with forest communities, government and the private sector to pilot a model of entrepreneurship based on the three pillars below. While this model was



developed for and with communities from Équateur<sup>11</sup>, it could provide valuable lessons for elsewhere in the Congo Basin and beyond.

### 1. Improved production

In Équateur, there is a huge variety of marketable products, including pepper, plantain, cassava, cocoa and corn. However, forest land parcels often have very low productivity, and farmers have virtually no access to equipment or agricultural inputs. For example, a forest area may produce a fine variety of cocoa that could reach premium markets, but this is potential is hampered by low production volumes and only few communities currently produce the crop.

As such, there is significant potential to increase productivity in Équateur without expanding production into forest areas. In these rich tropical rainforests, there is fertile ground for agroforestry, an approach that enables communities to diversify their income and increase their resilience. Following a 'Farmer Field School' approach, GASHE and RFUK are working with local communities to share best agricultural practices, promoting experimentation

<sup>11</sup> A thorough consultation process took place to develop and validate this model. Several community members were organised in four community forests and worked closely with communal governance bodies at all times. The meeting included presentations and open discussions; focus groups centred around specific products; analysis of existing communal funds; in-depth interviews with 120 households; and presentations of findings and results for improvement and validation by the whole community.



and peer-to-peer learning. The organisations also provide basic farming inputs (such as bags for dry cocoa beans), with an emphasis on promoting self-reliance.

For cocoa producers, this work includes techniques to improve the quality of their cocoa beans, with the future goal of serving premium chocolate markets. In the future, RFUK and GASHE will also support communities to assess the feasibility of obtaining certifications such as Organic and Fair Trade.

With increased yield, better quality<sup>12</sup>, and potentially higher premiums, households could significantly increase their incomes, provided the following conditions are also in place.

## 2. Producers' organisation

Cooperation among producers is vital, not only to improve the yield and quality of forest products, but also to pool resources for commercialising these products and improve bargaining power with traders. Forming cooperatives has often helped farmers in forest areas to achieve these goals<sup>13</sup>. However, communities in Équateur called for a simpler mechanism, better attuned to their culture, involving as little formality and as few administrative burdens as possible. The community decided to form looser Solidarity Funds,<sup>14</sup> set up around specific value chains. These funds report to community forest governance bodies to ensure that 1) production takes place according to the local management plan, and 2) a portion of the gains is shared with the community as a whole by investing in collective projects.



12 By improving drying and fermentation processes, cocoa beans become more suitable for chocolate production and therefore increase in value, for example.

13 RFUK has supported one such cooperative in Peru (see [here](#) and [here](#) for details) and we have exported many valuable lessons from this experience to our work in the Congo Basin.

14 In French "Mutuelles de Solidarité"

As these funds become consolidated, an objective is to facilitate savings and credit lines for members. Farmers will then be able to buy basic tools and inputs, and, in turn, improve quality and yield further and increase their incomes, creating a self-sustaining cycle.

### 3. Market access

The third pillar of our model looks to ensure that producers will be able to access markets in a stable and reliable way, and access the best prices they can get for their products. This component of the work requires a multi-pronged approach, which includes:

- Increasing volume and streamlining transportation by collecting products from several community forests and taking them to the most appropriate markets (local, national or international)
- Capacity building (through training, making connections with buyers and peer-to-peer learning) and information sharing to enable producers to demand fair prices
- Finding premium buyers for flagship products, particularly cocoa, with support from the private sector
- Advocacy, in collaboration with other actors, to improve the business environment for community forest entrepreneurship
- Establishing long-term, mutually beneficial contracts with the private sector, tapping into ethical buyers that identify with the mission of our work.

The Association of Cocoa and Coffee Exporters of the Democratic Republic of Congo (ASSECCAF) has been an invaluable collaborator in these endeavours, and is an example of a mutually beneficial alliance with the private sector. The partnership saw ASSECCAF contributing to project design from the beginning, then conducting scoping missions to

understand the cocoa market and supply in Lukolela. Based on this initial assessment, ASSECCAF could then provide training to help community members improve quality and demand fair prices, as well as help to identify international buyers and develop business plans. As a next step, ASSECCAF will contribute to the development of a revolving fund model, to improve access to finance for cocoa commercialisation, as well as conduct advocacy activities to improve the business environment in Équateur. ASSECCAF's work with RFUK and GASHE has helped to demonstrate that social development, environmental protection and business success can coexist successfully.

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Early successes show the promise of this model. Cocoa producers in the communities of Ilebo and Mibenga, both community forests in Équateur, have been able to double the prices they obtain for their beans by reaching markets directly and obtaining updated information on cocoa pricing. Dozens of producers have joined Solidarity Funds, and are working together to improve their products. The community forest institutions have ensured that increased incomes are already contributing to communal projects, including the refurbishment of schools and health centres and building guesthouses and offices.





## Recommendations

To promote a sustainable rural economy as a true lever for development – with both scale and speed – in the DRC and Congo Basin, there is a need for ongoing innovation and improvement, including:

- Increasing funding, including from climate and biodiversity pledges, and political support to community forests and other approaches that secure collective land rights and provide transparency on land use in the Congo Basin. In terms of political support, it is important to ensure that community forests are addressed in a cross-sectoral way and receive political steer from the highest levels of government.
- Promoting a profound transformation in access to finance, for producers, who lack even basic agricultural inputs, as well as buyers, for whom liquidity is necessary to collect cocoa and other products from remote locations and transport it to different markets
- Improving the business environment by simplifying bureaucratic processes and cutting administrative costs and fees that hamper the movement of goods, access to finance and collective organisation, such as forming cooperatives. This could include creating a specific regime for products from community forests.
- Promoting economies of scale among clusters of community forests, while ensuring these are compatible with forest protection goals. Land use planning at different scales, building from the community all the way to the national level is vital. In DRC, this entails preserving large tracts of land for community control, avoiding large land allocations to industrial logging, mining, oil extraction or other uses over these areas.
- In other Congo Basin countries, in which the forest space is almost entirely taken over by logging concessions and protected areas, a fundamental rethink is needed to make space for community land rights to promote entrepreneurship. This includes the possible declassification of existing concessions or testing “cohabitation” approaches that afford communities stronger land rights.



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