
[The Conservation International REDD pilot project in the Democratic Republic of Congo \(DRC\) – a very different kind of Walt Disney production](#)

In the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), Conservation International (CI) is promoting a REDD (Reducing Emissions from Deforestation and Forest Degradation) pilot project financed by the Walt Disney media and entertainment company. The project is being implemented in the Tayna and Kisimba-Ikobo nature reserves, and is one of the first of its kind in the region.

Despite the glowing presentations of the project available on the internet, little is known about what is happening on the ground, and particularly with regard to the local communities directly impacted by the project. In Africa in general, and the DRC especially, communities who live in and depend on forests for their survival are waging an arduous struggle for recognition of their rights to their lands and to the use of the forests.

This is why WRM decided to undertake a case study (1) to learn more about the impacts of the CI-Disney REDD project, by listening and giving a voice to representatives of local communities and other organizations involved, in order to contribute to the debate on REDD at the local and national level in the DRC, as well as internationally.

The importance of forests in the Congo and the rights of local communities

The DRC has the largest forested area in Africa, with various different types of forest that are extremely rich in biodiversity. Between 35 and 40 million people depend on these forests for their survival, as a source of food, medicinal plants, building materials for housing, and fuel. For many communities, the forests also have important spiritual, cultural and social significance.

The struggle of local communities to guarantee their legal rights to the lands where they live and the forests they use is a difficult one. The constitution of the DRC establishes a certain recognition of these rights, although all land in the country is technically the property of the Congolese state. Article 22 of the Forest Code stipulates that communities may obtain concession titles to the lands they occupy and use, based on their customary rights to those lands, although the modalities by which these rights are exercised remain under discussion. Meanwhile, in practice, the right of communities to occupy the lands they have traditionally occupied and to make traditional use of the forests is being violated, and countless communities have seen their lands transformed, for example, into national parks. Although the law obliges the state to consult with local communities over the creation of such protected areas, these continue to be created, and most often through the expulsion of the communities who live there. There are currently more than 26 million hectares of so-called “classified” forests, such as national parks, reserves and other protected areas, where the user rights of local communities are extremely limited, or use of the forests is completely prohibited.

In addition to this, for more than a decade, the DRC has been caught up in armed conflicts involving neighbouring countries, fuelled by competition for control over natural resources, primarily minerals, that are highly sought after by transnational companies. This has led to enormous suffering for the population, especially in the eastern region of the country. Armed groups continue to be active in this region, including the area of the Kisimba-Ikobo reserve, creating an ongoing climate of insecurity on

the site where the CI-Disney REDD project is being developed.

The REDD process in the DRC

The DRC was the first country in the Congo Basin to benefit from REDD financing through the World Bank's Forest Carbon Partnership Facility or FCPF (2)(USD 200,000) and the UN-REDD Programme (3) (USD 3.4 million), with the goal of implementing the REDD mechanism in the country post-2012. Additional financing for pilot projects from Norway and the United Kingdom is planned but still not operational. The various actors involved in promoting REDD generally grant significant importance to pilot projects, including the CI-Disney project.

It is striking how forest peoples in the DRC are singled out in this official process as the main drivers of deforestation, due to their traditional farming system of shifting cultivation. This is the case, for example, in the 2009 report prepared by the U.S. consulting firm McKinsey on the potential of REDD+ in the DRC, which also downplays the responsibility of logging companies in deforestation. The McKinsey report also recommends afforestation and reforestation through large-scale intensive agriculture, particularly the establishment of monoculture oil palm plantations, on seven million hectares of supposedly "marginal" land and another four million hectares of purportedly degraded forests, despite the major impacts that oil palm expansion is causing on the environment and local communities in Africa (4) and the negative impacts also documented in Asia and Latin America.(5)

The CI-Disney REDD pilot project in the DRC

The pilot project in question is the result of an agreement signed between the Walt Disney Company and CI for a total of USD 7 million. According to the marketing information released over the internet, this investment is aimed at "protecting forests" in Peru and the DRC. The protection and sustainable management of more than 500,000 hectares of rainforest will reportedly prevent more than 900,000 tons of CO₂ from being released into the atmosphere.

In the case of the DRC, the project aims to protect two so-called "community reserves" in the eastern province of Kivu North, the Tayna and Kisimba-Ikobo reserves, while improving social services, supporting local development and reducing poverty in local communities. Disney will be providing initial funding of USD 4 million; it is worth noting that the company's net income in 2010 was USD 7.59 billion. The company has stated that this investment forms part of its environmental policy, which includes the goal of cutting its carbon emissions in half.

The DRC project is being managed in partnership with the Dian Fossey Gorilla Fund International (DFGFI) and the Union of Associations for Gorilla Conservation and Development in Eastern DRC (UGADEC), a federation of local associations that work for conservation and community development in the region, thus contributing to the concept of "community reserve". USAID (6) is also participating through its CARPE (7) programme.

What is a "community reserve" in this context?

A "community reserve is an area managed by local communities, divided into three zones: a fully protected integral zone, where all human activity is prohibited; a buffer zone, where some human activity is allowed but is controlled; and a development zone designated for "permanent production" through economic activity and infrastructural improvements.

The Tayna "Community Reserve", which covers 90,000 hectares, was initially created in 1998 by

promoters of the idea of this type of “reserve”, with the participation of local traditional leaders. The Tayna reserve is considered the first initiative of this kind in the DRC and even in Central Africa. In 2006, this “community reserve” was recognized by the state and transformed into a nature reserve, called the Tayna Nature Reserve (RNT), through a decree issued by the Ministry of Environment and Nature Conservation. This decree defined the area as the property of the state but transferred management of the reserve from the competent state agency, the ICCN (7), to a “community” organization called RGT (Tayna Gorilla Reserve). Neighbouring communities were immediately benefited by a number of projects, such as the supply of electrical power in a few communities through a small hydroelectric plant, the creation of a nature conservation university, and improvements in healthcare and education infrastructure, among others.

The second community reserve involved in the REDD project is the Kisimbo-Ikobo Primate Reserve (RPKI) (8), which covers an area of 137,000 hectares. It was created for the purpose of expanding the conservation model established in Tayna, located further north in the same province. The RPKI, like the Tayna reserve, was officially designated as a nature reserve by ministerial decree, in 2006. The organization RECOPRIBA (9) was established to manage the reserve.

The two reserves form part of a nature conservation strategy aimed at creating a corridor to link Kahusi Biega National Park (PNKB) and Maiko National Park.

In the case of the RPKI, a significant number of traditional leaders, women and men in local communities have been opposed to its creation since 2003, as reflected in a vast accumulation of letters of protest to the authorities and subsequent letters of response. At one point, the Ministry of Justice went so far as to suspend RECOPRIBA, but this did not prevent the creation of the Kisimba-Ikobo nature reserve in 2006 by the Ministry of Environment and Nature Conservation. This particular move served to further exacerbate the ongoing conflicts, because it severely restricted the communities’ rights to the use of the forest, which they consider to be a veritable attack on their way of life.

The struggle waged by the communities of Kisimba and Ikobo is now aimed at revoking the creation of the nature reserve and replacing it with a system of community forest management, in which the communities themselves exercise control over the area, based on their constitutionally guaranteed rights. The agreement for the creation of the nature reserve should be overturned for the simple reason that it was signed by only two local chiefs, supposedly in representation of all of the communities, although they were not specifically authorized to do so.

Impacts of the REDD project on local communities

Although the REDD project agreement between Disney and CI was signed in 2009, the local population cannot actually comment on its impacts yet, since, according to UGADEC, the Project Design Document (PDD), which “technically” describes the REDD project in terms of prevented carbon emissions, is still being formulated. As a result, the first project payments are not expected until 2012 at the earliest. A socioeconomic survey is also being conducted to determine the actions to be undertaken to benefit the communities.

Nevertheless, it has been observed that since this REDD project was first announced, its promoters have been carrying out numerous activities that primarily emphasize the sensitization of the local communities, something that was already being carried out with regard to the preservation of gorillas and is now continuing in relation to the forest in general, for the purposes of the REDD project. According to the project’s promoters, an agreement signed by community leaders provides concrete

proof of the free and prior consent of the communities.

But we were able to determine that the consent for the implementation of the REDD project in the Kisimba-Ikobo reserve has numerous flaws and is, at best, only partial. Moreover, the process has only deepened an ongoing conflict in which land and forest use rights are at stake. Part of the community is opposed to the REDD project because it merely reinforces the creation of a “community” reserve which, in fact, has stripped these communities of their rights over their ancestral lands and forests. In a recent letter addressed to the governor of the province by dissatisfied communities from this reserve, they state that they are opposed to the REDD project because it does not respect their rights to the land and they have not been given the opportunity to express their demands.

The significant percentage of the population of Kisimba and Ikobo who already opposed the creation of the nature reserve and now the REDD project are being even further marginalized. The REDD project promoters seem to simply ignore the fact that this part of the population did not provide its consent for the project, and they are doing nothing to attempt to resolve the conflict. On the contrary, UGADEC officials announced that they would soon be initiating the “participatory” physical demarcation of the Kisimba-Ikobo reserve.

Even among those who are not opposed to the REDD project, there does not seem to be a very clear idea of what it will entail, particularly regarding the responsibilities of the population in the project area. Nevertheless, there are high expectations, as reflected in the comments of one of the community members interviewed:

We were informed about the REDD project and they told us that there are going to be a huge amount of benefits for us. They told us not to attack the forest anymore, but to protect it, the same way we protect the gorillas. (...) They told us that trees produce carbon, which is important for the atmosphere. Everyone is going to be well off and our lives are going to change. They told us the project is going to last 20 years, and it started three years ago and we still haven't seen anything. So we can see that the benefits are taking a long time to reach us and people are starting to get discouraged. But we keep on hoping, because they have filled us with hope.

Comments like these demonstrate the serious lack of information available on the project. The greatest source of information seems to be the internet, in a region with little or no internet access. Moreover, local actors have no knowledge of the contract signed between CI and Disney, much less the project budget, and that includes even the local leaders involved in the creation of the reserves. As a result, they have no real way of evaluating the implications of the project for the community. As one local actor commented, “CI and DFGFI have kept a lot of information to themselves.”

There was also little clarity among the community leaders interviewed about the division of responsibilities and tasks among CI, DFGFI, UGADEC, RGT and RPKI. All that several were able to say was that CI is responsible for the finances and DFGFI is handling the technical and administrative end. In the words of one local leader: “*It is our forest and other people are managing it in our place.*”

In the meantime, it was clear that for most of the people we spoke to who are directly involved in the implementation of the project, a REDD project is synonymous with the sale of carbon credits, which means it is necessary to calculate the amount of carbon stored in the forest and the amount that can be traded on the carbon market. But what is striking is that nobody seems to be concerned about who holds the rights to the carbon that would be “bought” by Disney, something that obviously has

implications for the distribution of the fees paid by the company for these credits. If this point is not clarified, it could potentially lead to new conflicts in the future.

Finally, it was observed that while the men in local communities have little information about REDD, the women have even less. During a conversation with the members of a women's association based in the area surrounding the Tayna reserve, one of the women stated, "We have never heard of REDD." This is remarkable, considering the fundamental role played by women in forest conservation.

Final considerations

The arrival of this REDD pilot project in the eastern DRC has created a great many expectations among the various actors involved, especially among local communities. Up to now, however, the project has contributed more to bolstering the image of CI and Disney as champions of "community" forest protection.

In the meantime, there is a serious conflict brewing over rights to the land and forests, involving a significant part of the population of the communities of Kisimba and Ikobo. This conflict urgently needs to be settled by the authorities.

Indeed, experience has shown that in the logic of REDD projects, local communities turn into an "obstacle". Studies carried out as part of the official REDD process in the DRC have even identified local communities as largely responsible for deforestation. Under these circumstances, the struggle of a significant part of the communities of Kisimba and Ikobo to implement a different kind of forest management, based on respect for their customary rights to the land and to use of the forests, becomes even more of an uphill battle. Legal and practical measures are urgently needed to make it possible to implement their proposal for genuine community forest management. This proposal is supported and actively promoted by numerous local NGOs in the region, such as Réseau CREF, who share the conviction that it is not only crucial for the future of these communities, but for the conservation of the DRC's forests as well.

Finally, the survival of the forests and the communities who depend on them in the DRC cannot be allowed to become hostage to the sale of carbon credits under the logic of REDD. It is simply unacceptable for local communities who have already suffered so much from years of armed conflict and violence to be forced to endure even more suffering, in order to allow a U.S. corporation to continue polluting the atmosphere while boosting its image as a protector of the forests through a relatively minor investment.

(1) This article is based on a case study on the CI-Disney REDD pilot project in the DRC undertaken by WRM in May 2011. The final report on the case study, authored by Belmond Tchoumba, will be published by WRM in September 2011.

(2) Forest Carbon Partnership Facility

(3) A United Nations programme created to assist countries in preparing and implementing national REDD+ strategies.

(4) See Oil Palm in Africa: past, present and future scenarios, available at: www.wrm.org.uy

(5) For more information, visit: www.wrm.org.uy

(6) United States Agency for International Development

(7) Central African Regional Program for the Environment

(8) Congolese Institute for the Conservation of Nature

(9) Bakumbule Community Primate Reserve

