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Policy Brief

Accelerating ecotourism development in the Congo Basin

Key Messages

To date, ecotourism development in the Congo Basin has not been a priority and the necessary enabling conditions have not been put in place.

A recent study commissioned by the CBFP explored the challenges to developing ecotourism in the Congo Basin, and identified actions and recommendations to overcome these.

Governments should play a key role in accelerating ecotourism development by putting in place necessary enabling conditions. The CBFP and other international structures can accelerate this process by means of facilitating exchange and promoting political action.

Recommendations to overcome key challenges include holding a subject-related presidential summit, easing access to visas, and removing barriers to private aviation. If implemented, such steps could greatly improve the competitiveness of the region and accelerate the development of ecotourism as a viable economic sector also in challenging political contexts.

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Tourism in Africa often takes center stage when discussing the continent's economic development and its future potential. For many African countries, tourism revenue is an important source of income and helps create jobs, promote entrepreneurship, and develop local economies. Tourism as a development tool in Africa was recognized by the African Union (AU). This was especially noted in the African Agenda 2063 and the 2004 AU-NEPAD Tourism Action Plan, as well as the subsequent Ministerial Working Group meetings that took place in 2014 and 2016 (AU, 2014, 2016). These working groups all recognized the importance of improving state-business relationships through public-private partnerships (PPPs), improving local and regional air access (Open Skies for Africa), and improving visa access (African Common Passport) (AU, 2016). However, while the national government members of the AU all support these important enabling conditions, very little has been done. To date in the Congo Basin, tourism development has not been a priority and the necessary enabling conditions have not been put in place.

It is generally accepted that there are at least **three prerequisites for tourism development – quality attractions, good accommodation, and easy access – and these are often referred to as the “three A’s”** (Dieke 2020). The Central African rainforest countries have incredible attractions, but very little accommodation and very limited to no access. Additional key aspects of competitiveness on the international market include reliability, security, and the provision of services related to the product, including ground handling, guiding, and hospitality.

For the last several decades, unstable governments, a series of coups, activities by rebel groups, and unstable

neighbors have resulted in negative reputations internationally and negative travel advisories from several Western governments. The countries of the Congo Basin are seen as medium-risk destinations and insurance companies often deny cover to clients going there. Such factors discourage independent travelers from visiting Central Africa and deter international travel operators from offering these countries to potential clients. This is a serious deterrent to the development of tourism by international investors as well as businesses based in the region.

To test its feasibility, tourism development in the Congo Basin has historically been largely implemented by park ma-

nagers and conservation NGOs in the form of “proof of concept-projects” with limited funding and employing conservation personnel. Conservation biologists familiar with the wildlife in the region opened their research sites to tourists with the hope of generating tourism revenue for the parks where they were already active. The levels of accommodation and hospitality varied greatly and facilities were often neglected due to lack of visitors. They were not developed and maintained due to a lack of markets, and markets could not be developed as adequate facilities were not available. This resulted in unpleasant hospitality experiences, and despite the existence of a small number of facilities near several national parks in the region, ecotourism development has generally failed to gain traction.

However, over that last decade, there have been several private investors that have taken **tentative steps toward pioneering professional ecotourism in Gabon, Republic of Congo, and Central African Republic**. It is important to recognize that these private businesses are key for sustainable economic development, creating the nascent hospitality industry and marketing the tourism products to compete with other destinations in the world. Nevertheless, in the Congo Basin they often act without financial support from government or other donors and their investments are at risk due to many bureaucratic and logistical hurdles.

- Research into the tourism sector in **Camereroon** indicates that the lack of tourism growth and development has primarily been due to an absence of tourism development and management policies, conflicts of interest between stakeholders and government policies, and non-implementation of park management plans (Kimbu & Tichaawa 2018, Forie et al. 2021 and Harilal et al. 2019).
- In **DRC**, there was an historical absence of any type of event devoted to the promotion of tourism, leading the government to hold its first edition of the International Tourism Fair in December 2020. The aim of this first forum was to sensitize political decision makers, the public, and economic operators about the importance of tourism for the socio-economic development of the Democratic Republic of Congo (Bunkulu Zola 2020)
- In the **Republic of the Congo (RoC)**, a National Policy Framework for Tourism Development was elaborated in 2015, with the support of the technical partners (UNDP and UNWTO) but there has not been any major advances towards its implementation. The document draws attention to support needed from the highest levels so tourism can contribute to the economic growth of the country. It states that tourism in RoC can only take place when the government improves its institutional, legislative and regulatory frameworks (Poliwa 2015).
- **Gabon** is often cited as one of the few countries in the region where there has been political support for the development of ecotourism. However, while there have been strides made in this sector, it is far from being actualized on the ground with many regulatory hurdles remaining for the development of tourism (Kimbu 2010b).
- In **Central African Republic (CAR)** recent political instability has resulted in several regime changes, precluding the elaboration of any coherent policy towards opening up to tourism. However, Despite a lack strong high-level political support, local officials and lodge operators, especially in the remote southwest rainforest part of the country, have managed to implement high quality tourist products.
- **Equatorial Guinea** has a comprehensive Tourism Master Plan (El Plan Director de Turismo de Guinea Equatorial) that establishes policies, strategies, and objectives for ensuring tourism is developed and contributes to social development. However, this five-year plan was developed in 2012 and expired well before its goals were met.

Policy Options and Recommendations

In light of many persisting constraints and challenges to developing ecotourism in the Congo Basin, it is important to focus on how these might be addressed to facilitate future development. Range states, NGOs, donors, and the private sector have made little progress so far in developing ecotourism in the region. If one or more of the pioneer private sector actors goes bankrupt or pulls out, it could not only discourage other investors but would tarnish the region as a destination where it is impossible to succeed. To reduce these risks and encourage additional private sector actors to help accelerate ecotourism development in the Congo Basin, a focus on practical solutions is needed.

One prerequisite for countries to succeed in developing tourism is to have high-level government support. This can be described as a “flying goose formation” where tourism development is the lead government component of economic development in a specific country. Under this arrangement, any legislation or regulations that could negatively affect tourism would have to be re-considered. Decision-makers as well as regional structures such as the Congo Basin Forest Partnership (CBFP) can accelerate this difficult process by taking a **three-pronged approach** including (1) **the general long-term goal of elevating ecotourism on the political agenda**. More specifically, this would include but not be limited to prioritizing the tourism sector in the national legislation, providing **incentives for pioneer investors, jointly marketing the rainforests as travel destination, and relaxing immigration and visa policy** to make the countries more competitive with other ecotourism destinations. Two short- to medium-

term activities could follow, namely (2) **involving ecotourism business in regional decisional bodies** and (3) **creating a Congo Basin Tourism Action Group**.

Regarding the first step, a recent study commissioned by the CBFP (Telfer & Reed 2021) underscores that it is **primarily governments** that would need to act in order to accelerate ecotourism in the region.

To generate the necessary political support for ecotourism development, regional partners could convene a presidential summit to promote to leaders the benefits of tourism, the necessary prerequisites, and the concrete steps to accelerate ecotourism development in their countries. This summit could be organized and facilitated by one of the regional presidents, the African Union (AU), the CBFP or as a joint effort. Such a summit could include government and business representatives from African countries where ecotourism plays a significant role in revenue generation, ecotourism development experts with experience in Africa and familiarity with the Congo Basin, and tourism marketing experts who have experience with the existing Congo Basin products. Ideally, leaders could commit to removing obstacles to tourism development and to enacting enabling legislation such as prioritizing favorable immigration policies, open sky policies for private tourism flights or charter companies, and fiscal incentives through tax relief to pioneer investors. A high-level regional group focused on implementing the required prerequisites and facilitating legislation that would remove key obstacles for ecotourism development could follow.

Regarding the second step, **regional decisional bodies** such as the Economic Community of Central African States (ECCAS), the Central African Economic and Monetary Community (CEMAC), the Central African Forests Commission (COMIFAC), and the CBFP should attempt to engage ecotourism businesses as private sector members or as economic-development experts. For example, the CBFP could actively seek out ecotourism business developers to become members of its Private Sector college. This would recognize the important role that ecotourism can play in the region, particularly in relation to social-economic development. It would also be a first step to creating a strong voice for tourism development in the region, a voice that is currently not heard. More specifically, the CBFP could appoint appropriate representatives of the tourism private sector to the CBFP Council to support the development of positive policies for tourism and other non-extractive industries in the Congo Basin.

A third step would be to establish a Tourism Action Group (TAG) comprising private sector tourism developers, high-level government representatives, donors, and conservation NGOs. This group could be affiliated with the CBFP or other regional or cross-national structures. Led by the private sector, the TAG could support and consult on the development of pro-ecotourism development policies in the range states. It could monitor activity quarterly and report back to the CBFP.

Another critical role the TAG could fulfill would be to **act as facilitator and work with national stakeholders in determining how best to include local communi-**

ties in decision-making processes and revenue sharing so that they, as protectors of the environment in which they live, can be integrated appropriately into any and all ecotourism development. Revenue sharing structures used in other parts of Africa must be evaluated and implemented to ensure that communities directly benefit from the economic development of the region. The TAG should investigate ways through which local communities will be enabled to equitably manage and distribute any newly acquired funds to avoid creating internal conflict within the communities, as well as to avoid potential conflict with ecotourism developers. The TAG could also collect and provide expertise on hospitality industry capacity development access for local community members, building on examples from other African countries where ecotourism is successful. By means of creating management structures where elected community members serve as part of management authority decision-making bodies (such as those found in existing PPPs in the region), communities should be included in the management decisions related to the lands used for ecotourism development.

Additionally, the TAG could liaise with governments in developing and protecting ecotourism initiatives in and around protected areas, facilitate donor commitments to develop and protect these products, and **ensure that ecotourism pioneers in the region are supported by governments, donors and NGOs**. The group could evaluate other successful ecotourism destinations in Amazonia, Costa Rica, Southeast Asia, and Eastern and Southern African to understand their successes and marketing strategies. The TAG could then advise and facilitate establishing a sustained public

relations and marketing campaign for the Congo Basin to create and promote a regional destination.

More generally, it should be recognized that **private sector investors** clearly favor well developed and protected ecotourism products. Here, distinguishing between park management (product development and protection) and tourism development is important. If protected areas do not function properly, and there is no security and no investment opportunity, the private sector will not be inclined to develop facilities. Hence, governments must empower their protected area management departments to develop and protect the ecotourism wildlife products, either by providing sufficient funding and resources themselves or by promoting **public-private Partnerships (PPPs)**. Governments need to support park management and non-profit work, distinguishing it from ecotourism and the hospitality industry business. Non-profitable activities such as infrastructure (roads, airstrips, etc.) and product development (wildlife habitation and protection) will have to be funded non-commercially with public support. This will accelerate and local communities deriving economic benefits will flourish due to the increased revenue shared with the developers. While relieving the burden on ecotourism developers, the government would also support community development.

Few private companies have the means to invest in the Congo Basin without some form of external financial support, especially because of the long time horizons for businesses to become profitable and begin recovering the capital investment costs. Thus, CBFP donors are encouraged to develop mechanisms to assist pioneering investors, such as **pro-**

viding “matching funds” to assist in product development. There are already examples of this that can be encouraged and amplified. The Foundation Tri-National de Sangha (FTNS) provides funding for non-profitable infrastructure development in a tri-national protected area and USAID currently offers to provide matching funds to implement non-profitable product development and protection in return for private tourism investment in the area.

In recognition that national and regional commitments and implementation of the critical enabling conditions will take time, it is important to **act in the short term to accelerate and support the current efforts** in the region, and more importantly, to ensure that the **few existing pioneers do not fail**. Some examples of such pioneers are the Congo Conservation Company in the Republic of Congo, Sangha Lodge in Central African Republic, and Gabon Wildlife Camps and Safaris as well as African Equatorial Safaris in Gabon. If any of these private companies fail, lasting negative effects that could severely discourage any other potential investors can be expected. In the short term, before changing or enacting national legislation, the relevant governments could provide specific derogations to these companies. Specific exemptions could increase the competitiveness of these businesses, allowing them to recover their investments or at least cover their operating costs more easily. When companies are profitable, governments can share in sustainable income revenues. However, if the government taps into a company's revenue before it becomes profitable, it becomes part of the problem instead of the solution.

Derogations or exemptions could include specific relief for visas, and easing of restrictions on private aviation business. Currently, for tourists traveling to Odzala (Republic of Congo), a visa can be obtained on entry at the international airport if arriving from countries that do not have a Congolese Embassy. In Virunga, an entry visa is granted by the park authorities as part of the park entry fees. These specific, negotiated waivers already in place could be expanded to cover all tourists for the aforementioned and other companies. By relaxing specific immigration policies, and restrictions related to private aviation, the govern-

ments would remove two of the most important obstacles to tourism development, making travel easier and more affordable, which in turn would make the region far more competitive.

Finally, to understand **marketing strategies** that brought success to rainforests as ecotourism destinations elsewhere, one should review marketing efforts in Amazonia and Southeast Asia. A regional public relations and marketing campaign for Congo Basin ecotourism could be elaborated by the TAG. The outcome could include a five-year marketing strategy. Marketing the existing products

jointly as a single, regional destination is a more promising way forward than promoting each single product or country in isolation. This could help create the appearance of a safe, stable, and uniquely attractive “new rainforest destination”. Ideally, countries would be inspired to foster collaboration and distribute the costs and risks away from single governments. Pooled resources could be mobilized for this joint product, associating the region with a new positive “rainforest” image rather than the historical negative images that currently saturate the media and marketing space.

Conclusion and outlook

Ecotourism can become a significant contributor to the socio-economic development of the Congo Basin. The rainforest attractions are unique in the world and offer incredible opportunities for entrepreneurial business developers to create a dynamic economic sector that has the potential to help propel the region forward. The CBFP is uniquely position-

ned to play a key role in accelerating ecotourism development by assisting its government partners to put in place the necessary enabling conditions and in removing existing obstacles. The CBFP could do this by facilitating a regional presidential summit, opening its doors to ecotourism business members, and creating a CBFP action group dedicated

to moving the region out of obscurity, away from negative images and into a future where ecotourism is a driver of economic sustainability.

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